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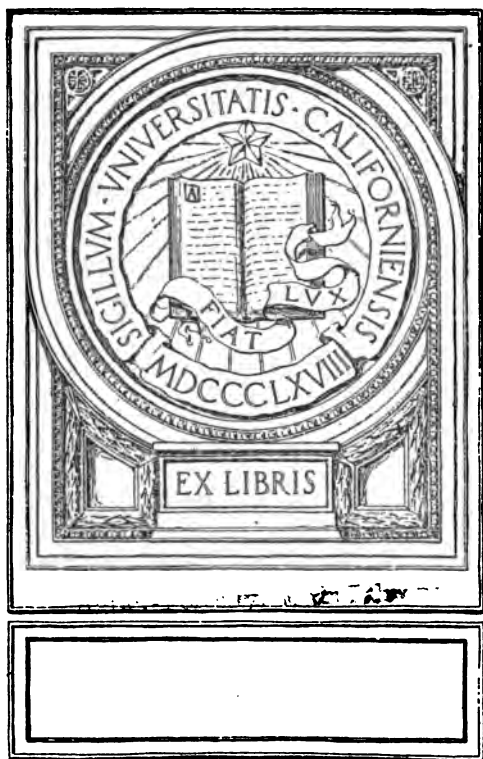
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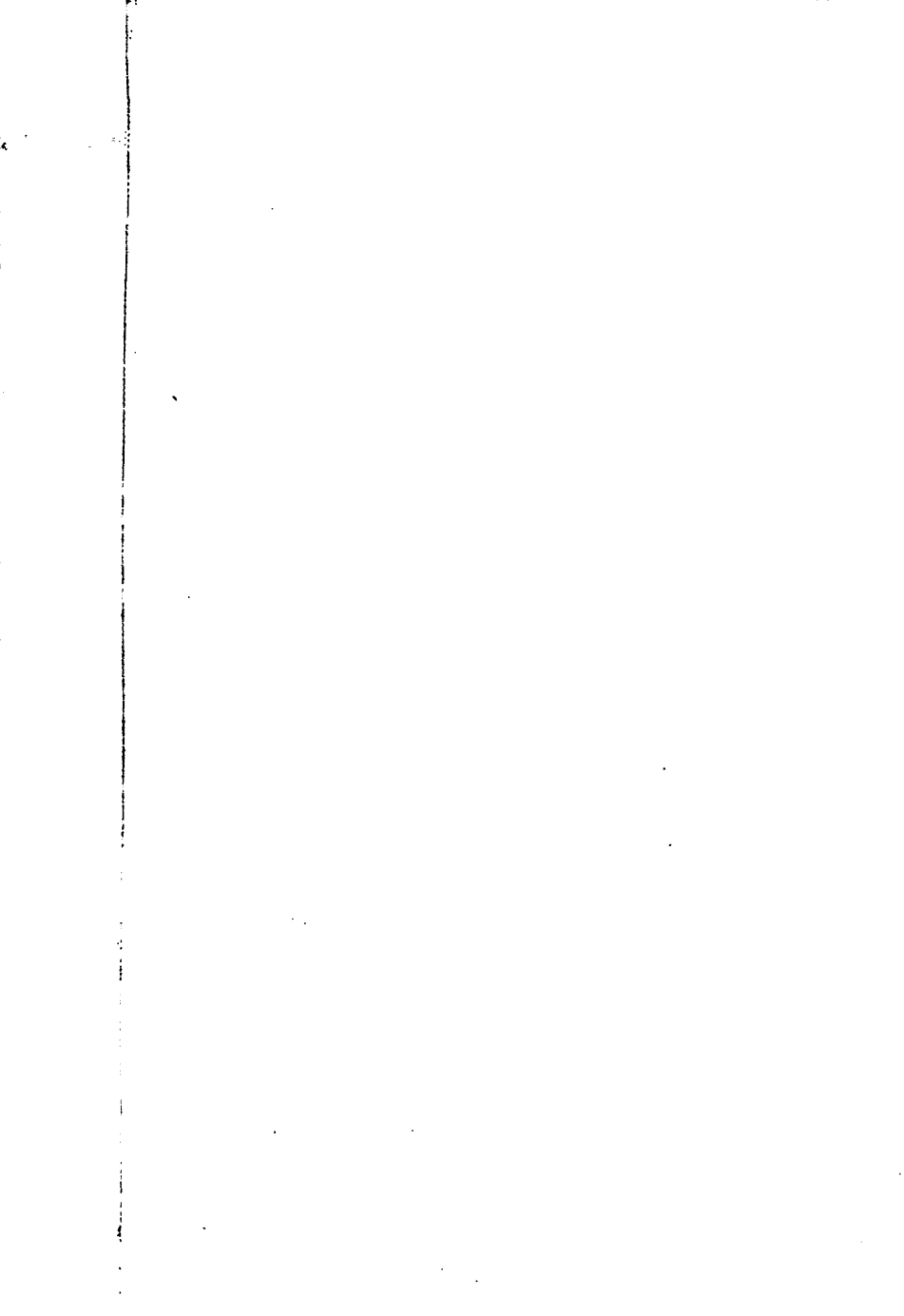
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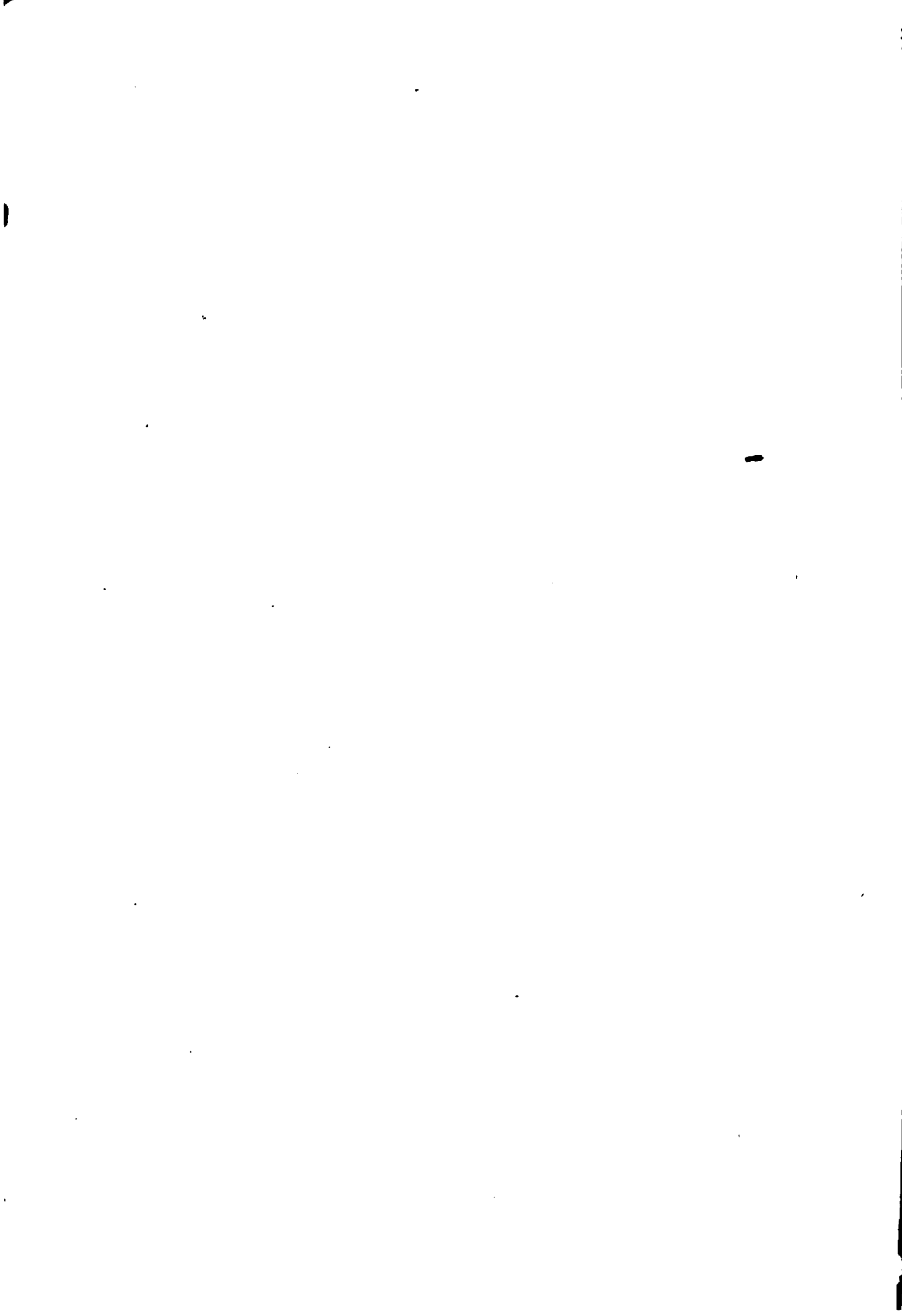
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“TIMBER”



“TIMBER”

BY
HAROLD TITUS

Author of
“The Last Straw,” “Bruce of the Circle A,” etc.



BOOK OF
CAMPFIRE

BOSTON
SMALL, MAYNARD & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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(INCORPORATED)

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WASHINGTON, D. C.

Printed in the United States of America

THE MURRAY PRINTING COMPANY
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

"TIMBER"

CHAPTER I

A WHITE Florida moon hung low over the river, flanked, for Luke Taylor and his son John, by a yellow pine and a moss-bearded oak. The night was mild and young John was dressed in summer clothing, but Luke sat drawn into his mink-lined overcoat, as if the outlook from the wide verandah of his winter home were of the bleak north instead of the edge of the tropics. His withered hands lay on the arm of the wicker chair and his cold eyes stared straight before him.

"So you think I owe you that, do you?"

John shifted uneasily and ran a big white hand through his light hair.

"You see, father, if I'm to have an even start with other men of my — sort, it's necessary."

Luke grunted skeptically.

"Of course I could start out now and find a job, go to work for some of my friends who are no better equipped to hold an advantage over me than I am over them, but who've been — who've had fathers who helped them."

"You mean it's work you don't want?" Luke asked, still watching the river.

"Of course not; I'm not afraid of work, but I don't want to put in the best years of my life grubbing when I might be building."

"A flying start — *that's* what you want, eh?"

Luke's blue eyes swung to his son and studied the young face.

"That's it."

"Hum, a flyin' start! And I suppose that's what all you young bucks 're looking for now. You don't want to grub out a foundation; you want that done for you."

The old man drew a long breath.

"We never thought of them things," he said with a hint of bitterness. "The start I got — an' I was younger than you are now — was standin' to my waist in the Saginaw, with th' river gone mad with ice an' logs. That wa'n't much like a flyin' start. It was hard toil, until th' water warmed an' the last log was in the boom. Then it was a summer in th' mills and when the snow came, back to th' woods again. Five — Six? Devil himself knows how many years, we didn't count years then; not lads my age. There was time a-plenty. Harmon put me to head th' drive; then I was woods boss, an' later he made me walkin' boss for five camps. Come next fall he took my savin's, and what they bought give me my chance to buy pine of my own — Pine!" He spoke the word as if it should be capitalized. He sighed.

"From then on it was a fight against debt an' rivers an' men. I'd learned about men an' rivers when I was dryin' my socks around some other man's stove. I had to learn about debt myself, an' that was all. I did learn, an' I made money, I did things that even old Harmon was afraid to do. I took what other men thought was chances an' made big on 'em; but they wasn't chances. I knew that, because I knew about men an' rivers, an' debt — finally."

"You surely —," began John.

"Wait! It aint just the amblin' of an old man. I'm goin' some place. For a long time you've been fixin' for this. I know," nodding fiercely. "I've watched an' waited to see when you'd screw up your nerve."

John stirred uneasily, but his father proceeded.

"An' what did all that work an' knowledge mean? It meant a fortune!" Within the house a man with sleek black hair spoke quietly into a desk telephone, and Luke jerked his head toward him. "Rowe, there, can tell you how much it is. I don't even pay attention to that, now. I used to keep my own books, used to be proud to figure that fortune — no longer!"

He shook his head and the old mouth set grimly.

"I'd give it all, every dollar, every cent; give my credit to the last dime to be back there again with an' ice-cold river huggin' my legs an' a peavy in my hand, gettin' my start, learnin' about men an' timber an' wonderin' about debt. I read the other day about a doctor that makes men young. Paper talk! But if it was true, if he could make me young again, I'd want to leave all I've made with the old shell and go back to th' beginning once more with nothin' but my hands." He eyed his old palms, protruding from the sleeves of the overcoat. "Only — steady hands."

Luke again looked at the moon, now edging toward the pine trees.

"But there's nothin' to go back to, nothin' I care about! Th' Pine that made me dream dreams when I was drivin' the Saginaw 's gone. No Michigan White Pine left, which was the only White Pine worth th' name! Western — yes; mixed stands; it ain't the real old quality; not th' cork." He shook his head. "An' such

as that!" a contemptuous gesture toward the plume into which the moon drifted, "counterfeit pine!" He breathed audibly through his open mouth and turned to glare at his son who sat motionless.

"Counterfeit! So's my life! They tell me it was th' weeks in cold water that drives me down here when the geese comes over Detroit, an' keeps me here until the ice is out of the Great Lakes. They tell me it's th' cold of Michigan rivers that's in my bones now. It ain't! I know what it is!" He wriggled deeper into his fur coat, muttering inarticulately.

"It's somethin' else that's gone, boy. It's the Pine! You young bucks ain't what we were. There's nothin' to make your blood jump like a White Pine forest did mine! If I could lose every penny even now, old as I am, but could walk through a stand of real Michigan timber again, I wouldn't be cold. Them days, I could sink my axe to th' eye every blow; with a saw gang, I could finish my fifteen thousand a day, an' th' days were short, too. There was somethin' in that, which you bucks can't know. Pine! Pine, standin' there, straight an' true, trees thick as hair on a dog, waitin' for good men to come an' get it!"

He seemed to shrink in size as his voice fell.

"Gad! It warms me to think about goin' into Pine again! Not to make money!" with a sudden cry. "To cut! To drive! To saw it! To see a forest all about you when th' snow flies an' to know that when winter breaks up there'll be sections with nothin' left but tops an' stumps on 'em; to know that it's your hands an' your men's hands that'll do it! There's power in that, boy, because logs build homes an' homes build nations!

"Some flap-doodle old women are callin' us destroyers and devastators! What was timber for? *They* use it, don't they, while they yell about what we've done! They sob about th' next generation, but why th' hell should we care about what's comin'? Didn't Michigan Pine build th' corn belt? An' where'd this country be without its grain lands now? Didn't Michigan Pine build cities that make the country wealthy? Hump! What's th' next generation to me? Every generation has its work to do. Anyhow look at yourself! Bah! you want to commence to learn some business from th' top down. You want to put on th' cornice before you've got the foundation in, because you don't want th' rough work. You're the kind that these old women are worrying over. I tell you, boy, you an' your like don't deserve worry from anybody, even from an old woman in pants."

"That's unfair!" John half rose as he said it, and color rushed into his face.

"This has been corked up in me too long now!" His son settled back. "Unfair, am I? If you think that's unfair, wait till I get through! You come to me for what you call a start, an' what my daddy would call a finish. You, with your six feet, your hunderd-eighty pounds of youth, your strong back an' good eye, an' a better education than any of us ever had; you who're fitted for harder work than any of us, an' now you don't want to muss up your hands!"

"You don't consider one thing, sir," John cried. "You blame me for not doing the way your generation did, and you don't stop to think that this is no longer your generation."

"I don't, eh? I don't consider that? You don't con-

sider then, young man, that I'm not only tryin' to give you hell but to include your whole generation, if you're a sample of it. Listen to me!" wriggling erect again. "I come up on a Pennsylvania farm with never enough to wear, an' sometimes not enough to eat. I worked from th' time I can remember. When I went to school it was because there was no work to do. You come up in a house that when it was built was th' finest in all Detroit. You had more clothes in your first ten years than I'd had before you were born. What was spent on your grub in one month would've kept my brothers an' sisters a year, an' I've lost track how many of us there was. You never did a tap for yourself from th' time your mother turned you over to a nurse girl until you went to college, an' then you lived in a club with a nigger to look after you. You've gone through all the schools there are, an' what I spent on you would've educated my school district."

He tapped the arm of his chair with a trembling hand. "When you got out of college, I sort of thought maybe you'd start in an' help th' old man out, you bein' th' only child," a mild disappointment in the tone. "Anyhow, I thought — But you didn't. I had to have somebody, so I hired Rowe. He knows how to work; not like I did, not with an axe of course, but with his head. Work's all pretty much the same. He's a good boy, but sometimes it grinds me to think I have to turn my affairs over to some other man's son to run. You're as strong as I ever was; you know about things that I never heard of," voice rising — "But I'm through! I'm goin' on th' back trail again. Now — *you* talk!" and from his tone it was certain that he added in his own thoughts, "If you dare!"

Young John dared. He rose slowly, and stood looking down at his father, feet spread, hands in pockets of his smart coat.

"That's the hardest ride I've ever taken," he said. "It wasn't very pleasant, I wouldn't have stood it this way if I thought you understood. You don't."

Luke grunted. "If I had been a young man in your generation, I'd have started as you did, because that was the way all men began. It was backs and brains that made money then. It isn't that way now."

"What makes money, then?"

"Money." Luke eyed his son who waited a moment before going on: "Money makes money. The man with money makes money. The man who starts without it now is under as much of a handicap as you would have been if your back had been weak. Your father gave you your back to start with. The fathers of sons today give them money to make a beginning. I don't consider, then, when I ask you to set me up, that I am asking any more than you expected in your time. A different sort of favor, but it's no greater."

The old man snuggled down into his chair.

"Well?"

"That's — that's all, sir."

One withered hand tapped the chair arm testily.

"If I give you money, how do I know you have got sense enough to use it to make more? What've you ever *done*?"

John shifted one foot slowly.

"Well I was a captain in —"

"Don't make me laugh; I've got a stitch in my side. Captain in the Quartermaster Corps, eh? An' what else?"

"There hasn't been time for much else."

"Time! Good God, boy, you've been out of th' army most a year! What've you done with that year? Tame women? Yes. Hump! From where I sit you seem to be a pretty capable Turk, or maybe it's my money they want — like you want it. Do you list that with your references? Your luck with these flossy young petticoats?" The boy flushed so deeply that it was evident even in the dim light. "An' this little wisp of goldenrod, she seems to have run th' others out. I s'pose you think I owe her something."

"I owe Marcia something. That much is true."

"Our women used to put up with hardships, shoulder to shoulder."

"Our women don't do that, they are a different breed."

Inside, a telephone bell whirled.

"Yes, a different breed. You said it there; different. Like you bucks are different." Luke nodded sagely; his mouth was shut, letting his loose cheeks sag over the corners. "You want it in a hurry; all that matters is the reward. The race don't mean anything."

A sudden resentment rang in that tone. John stirred uneasily. He did not speak, nor did the old man's lips relax. The telephone called again, then steps on the rug, and Philip Rowe crossed the room hurriedly. They heard his voice.

"Yes, this is Mr. Taylor's residence — No — This is Mr. Taylor's secretary speaking."

"Secretary!" snorted Luke.

"Give me the message please, — all ready —"

And from Luke: "Bookkeeper! Bookkeeper! They've all got their notions."

The French doors were open and John Taylor did not care to continue his discussion under the ears of the sleek Rowe who was writing hurriedly on a pad. When he was through he stood up and read what he had written, stroking his small mustache thoughtfully. Luke roused and strained to look over his shoulder.

"For me, Rowe?"

"Yes, Mr. Taylor. A telegram from McLellan. I will frame an answer."

He had stepped outside, the paper in his hand. His voice was slow, even and assured.

"What was it?"

"About the Blueberry hardwood."

"Oh!" Luke sat back, rubbing his nose with a knuckle. "He's looked it up?"

"Yes, sir. There are about three hundred thousand feet left."

"Three hundred thousand!" He looked at Rowe with a decided glitter of rage. The secretary returned the stare and shook his head slowly. After a moment Luke's gaze wandered as he again rubbed his sharp nose with a thin knuckle. It came to rest on his son's face, enigmatic, speculative. His lips worked.

"Three hundred thousand of hardwood logs," he mumbled, "an' the price of lumber gone hog-wild — eh!"

He settled back and his hands, palms up, lay relaxed on the chair arms. A queer smile played around his mouth and the wrath died in his eyes.

"Boy, a man's never so apt to be wrong as when he's too sure," he began. Rowe started to withdraw, but Luke's gesture stayed him. "I don't want to be wrong on this. — John an' me, Rowe, have been talkin' business. He's

decided it's time he does something to make his — fortune," dryly. "We've had a little argument, which didn't get us much of anywhere. John calculates I owe him somethin', and mebby I do — after hearing what he's had to say to me tonight." There was a streak of grit in the tone, as though he repressed some strong impulse. "He wants a start, a flyin' start — somethin' he can turn over quick, an' not have to monkey along at hard work and spend the years I did —" He licked his lips and, before his disconcerting manner, John stirred uneasily.

"John's got a better education than I ever had. He's more sure of himself than I was at his age. He thinks I don't understand him, an' mebby I don't." He wheezed an odd laugh and rubbed his nose briskly. "Ah-hel! There's nothin' so likely to upset a man as bein' too sure.

"Son," sobering and stirring in his chair, "logs are worth money today. Three hundred thousand of hardwood's worth what I'd have called a *lot* of money. How'd that suit you, if I give you this three hundred thousand for your start — so's you wouldn't have to grub along, so's you'd have it plumb easy compared to what I had?"

The secretary's head made a slight forward movement, as in surprise, but Luke's face betrayed nothing, except a grim settling of the mouth; Rowe then looked at John and the boy thought a smirk crossed his lips.

"You can make out the papers, Rowe, an' throw in that forty," said the old man. "You can do it tomorrow, can't you?"

"Yes, sir, the first thing in the morning."

Silence for a moment; Rowe walked away, and as he

crossed the room inside his head rocked back, as though, perhaps, he laughed to himself.

Young Taylor watched him go and then turned to his father.

"Logs?" he asked, rather bewildered. "Why, I don't know saw-logs from —"

"From bumble-bees," Luke finished for him with anger in his voice — and a smile in his eyes. "But, mebby your fortune's there, in them logs, boy. *I'd 'a jumped at a gift like that — You've heard about logs all your life; likely you know more about logs than you do anything else — Well, there's your chance. Take it or leave it. —Course, think it over; think it over. There ain't any rush as far as I can judge by th' way you put in your time — Now run along, I got all stirred up, talkin' about Michigan Pine. Think it over, I'd say it was a handsome start —*"

For a moment their gazes met, and apprehension ran through the younger man, for he did not like the sort of smile that clung to his father's eyes; did not like the forbidding set of his mouth.

"Very well, sir; I will think it over," he said, trying to cram his reply with dignity, and walked inside.

John stood before a mirror in the library, studying his own reflection. He did not like this, it struck at his conceit; it was distasteful, but there had been something else in his father's manner beside subtle derision — a challenge, perhaps. He sat down to think it over.

CHAPTER II

JOHN TAYLOR was so absorbed that he did not hear the motor car come up the drive and stop at the side of the house. Philip Rowe was just leaving, light coat over his arm, when the headlights swung in from the street and blinded him. He stood on the step until the car stopped.

"Hello, Phil." It was a girl's voice, crisp and clear.

"Marcia?" He stepped forward and put out his hand.

"Is John here?" she asked, and added, "I have an engagement with him."

The interval before Rowe replied was long enough to imply disappointment.

"He's in the house now — unfortunately!"

"Flatterer! Tonight I — "

"You what?"

"Came for John — "

"And what else? What were you going to say?"

He moved nearer so he could see her face, dimly revealed by the dash light. She drew back, showing her very white teeth.

"Nothing at all," she laughed lowly, and when he gave a breath of only half-pretended dejection, she whispered: "I came for John — *tonight!* "

Rowe looked quickly into the house, then made as if to open the car door, but the girl's hand flew out to hold the latch fast.

"Please, Phil!"

Their gazes held a moment, bright with insinuating lights. Then Rowe bowed.

"Very well," he said, and entered the house to summon young Taylor.

When John appeared Rowe was walking out the drive toward the street, very erect, with confidence in the sway of his shoulders. The girl had been watching him.

Taylor spoke slowly to Marcia Murray and smiled and slouched down beside her, showing an ease that was something more than familiarity with this one girl. There are men who never can be comfortable in the presence of any woman, who must always be self-conscious even before the mothers of their children; these are the men who are failures with women and who are secretly afraid and consciously inferior. On the other extreme are the men whose glances at women are always penetrating and never very curious; they have the assurance which makes for easy acquaintanceships that they take lightly and which thrill their gentler parties; they are at once fond and scornful of women, and know that the one does not live who can blind them to her weaknesses; they like to see this deception tried simply to give them justification for bringing some presumptuous female to humiliation. The chief difference between these two types of men is that now and again the former is surprised by having a triumph forced on him; quite often the latter is bewildered by a defeat. John Taylor belonged to the second group.

The car swung out to the street.

"Where away?" John asked.

She did not respond to his smile.

"You are worried," she said.

"Not much."

"But some!"

"Yes."

"Want to talk?"

"More than anything else."

She turned along the car tracks, reached a small foot for the accelerator and they leaped ahead.

"Now talk to me," she said.

"I'd rather just look at you."

She lifted her chin. "An unfair advantage! My eyes are on the road."

"So's your mind. When we're somewhere else, I'll talk."

She dropped one hand from the wheel to pat his knee swiftly and flashed a smile at him. Then she kept busy with driving, while Taylor took his unfair advantage.

Marcia Murray was small and very trim. Her hair, even in the cold light of the arc under which they swept, was a glorious yellow. Luke had called her a wisp of goldenrod and John knew the old man had been half contemptuous; now the words came back to him and his throat contracted. She was just that; a stalk of goldenrod, fragile, slight, lovely. Her little features were sharp, eyes large and heavy-lashed. The silken legs stretching for clutch and brake were as gently moulded as her fine hands on the wheel.

They left town and swept along the paved drive through scattered yellow pines where the moonlight bathed the girl and made John's heart leap — She was so like a cameo! He could conjure all manner of delightful things to say of her — And then they slowed where the road swung to the right and she let the car roll from pavement to turf beneath great oaks that dripped moss with the

river again before them spattered by the superwhite moonlight. The engine stopped and upon them burst the cries of millions of night bodies, a shrill, sustained chorus, a metallic trill. A wind rippled the stream and moonbeams flashed from it, like rays from mirrors. A bunch of coots, sleeping on the water, showed black not fifty yards from them.

Marcia leaned forward and switched off the dash light; her slim, very cool hand found Taylor's.

"Now what?" she said gravely — and Taylor told what had taken place with his father; told it, mostly, looking straight into her eyes, which looked back at him, wide, understanding and patient, but when he finished his narrative of what had happened and turned his gaze out on the river, the girl's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and a look that was not patience showed there.

"My father's a queer old bird," he went on. "He's never understood me. He's never seemed to have much interest in me, especially since I went away to college; never stinted me in allowance and never crabbed because I didn't settle down, but there hasn't been much in common — except that we're father and son. I hadn't intended to put it up to him quite this way, but he forced my hand. He doesn't like the notion of any one getting anything without sweating for it, he doesn't like to have any one have opinions of his own — Logs are worth a lot of money, I know, but this isn't a marker to what I'd expected he would do for me. He knows, as well as I know, that it won't fill the bill and give me any sort of a start. I've thought it over and the only answer I can find is that he wants to see what I am wound on."

"And if you make good on this — ?"

"Then he might come across properly."

The girl put a hand to his shoulder and shook him.

"Then you will, John! You have everything to gain, nothing to lose."

He nodded. "That's about the size of it. I don't want that sort of start, I've had my share of roughing it in the army; but it's only for a few weeks and it's a good gamble — if I make good."

"Of course you will," Marcia said.

Taylor turned toward her impulsively and put both arms around her small body, looking down into her moonlit face.

"Will you go with me, Marcia?" he asked.

"Go with you? You mean — ?"

He nodded. "Marry me now. Let's start together. Let's begin as though this really were the beginning, and we were going to make a fortune by the strength of my back — Marcia, will you?"

His voice was unsteady with eagerness and he drew her closer, struggling to hold her face to the moonlight, but she ducked it out of his sight, buried it against his shoulder and he felt a shudder travel her body.

"Marcia!"

"Don't, John!"

"Marcia, what is it?" He forced her chin upward and called her name again when he saw tears in her eyes. "What is it?"

She shook her head and pressed knuckles against her lips, looking away. "It's the same thing you tried to explain to your father," she whispered, voice husky, words rapid. "Don't you see that, John? Don't you see that to begin that way is asking something of me that you have

tried to avoid yourself?" He murmured contritely as she went on. "I'm no more fitted to begin life as a poor man's wife than you are to — to work with your back! It isn't in me, dear. I feel small, mean and inferior. You've been so big and fine to me; I know you need me, but I'm thinking of the future. I don't want to mar our happiness by a bad beginning. I want to be with you. I'd give anything if I could marry you now and go into the woods with you. But what is a girl to do?" She held out a hand in query, which disengaged his close embrace. "I can't break away from the environment of my whole life, can I? After I've been schooled to tastes for beautiful things, after I've been taught to think that nothing is worth while, which is ugly, I'm not wholly to blame if I find my ideas fixed, am I?"

"Don't, Marcia! It's all such nonsense to be miserable over this."

"But I am! Don't you see that the two strongest impulses in my life are coming into conflict tonight? On one side is my love for you, on the other my unfitness to live a life that is cramped by the lack of money. I've been on the ragged edge of want ever since I can remember! Here I was with girls for friends who knew no scrimping, no ugliness, being taught to devote my whole soul to things that they thought were worth while, and, of course, things that only money could buy. And I lived in a home — Why, John, you and I never would have been here tonight if we hadn't established the practice of renting the apartment winters. Papa takes a room and mama and I come up here. We couldn't do it unless we leased the place we live in most of the year. We're here now because we had to rent until the middle of April this time! I have a car

at the cost of a thousand little privations. I have clothes while my mother darns my father's underwear!"

"Oh, it's been awful! But what could I do? I was not trained to work; I was not trained to undergo humiliation and hardships. I was —"

"And you won't have to!" he broke in savagely. "I was a fool to ask this of you tonight. I was carried away; that's all! I'll go out and do things for you, Marcia. I can pioneer as well as my father pioneered, for a little while. I will show him that *I* can work, as he worked, if necessary. I'll make him regret what he said to me and when I do that, I'll bring comfort to you, sweetheart! You're right! Your training has been right! Money and what it will bring is *all* that matters. How you get it, even, doesn't count any more, unless you're a downright thief. It's dog eat dog and the weak man lose! I hate to grub. I hate to make a mean, slow beginning, but it's my father's way. He doesn't care about money, but he doesn't care about me particularly, either. If I can make him like me by taking up this offer — it won't be long, Marcia, it won't be long!"

She yielded to his embrace again, and lifted her tear-wet face to his. One arm crept about his shoulders and lay there — like the caressing tendril of a flower — or the binding tendril of a creeper; and her eyes, on a distant star, narrowed again, though they were still wet, as she drew his face into the hollow of her soft throat.

"I feel like a rotter," he said. "I've come up short against the collar, when I thought there was no limit to the leash. I've been doing you an injustice, been wasting our youth, when we should have every hour together. I've been keeping you in this damned uncomfortable situation

you have at home, while I dawdled. Now I'm through!"

"I knew I could trust you," she breathed, and though the voice was very gentle and sweet it possessed a quality which indicated that she had arrived at that trust only after difficulties — and perhaps she was not yet sure. It made the man start and repeat his promise, lips against her cheek, determination hot and not to be questioned.

Their hands met in a clasp of good will, and Taylor again pressed his kisses upon her lips and throat, and all the time her eyes were open, fixed on space, as though she listened for some word, waited for some thought — unshaken by his burst of passion.

They drove home slowly, John at the wheel, Marcia snuggled against him, her arm over his shoulder. Halfway in she said:

"John, don't you sometimes think Phil Rowe is awfully close to your father? Almost dangerously close?"

"Dangerously?" he asked with an idle laugh. "I think Phil's safe enough."

"I don't mean that — Dangerously for you. He seems to have a better grasp on your father's affairs than any one."

"Oh, I see — Of course, father leaves all the details to him, and Phil's a mighty competent chap for an underling."

"He doesn't strike me as an underling."

John chuckled. "He calls himself father's secretary, which of course he is. Father — insists on calling him his bookkeeper."

Marcia's laugh was most perfunctory. "He's the sort of chap who would take a lot of ridicule and wait for the last laugh. He — seems so tenacious."

"That's the sort father needs."

"Perhaps." A pause. "When you are away, he even answers your letters, doesn't he? He has told me that."

"Father never writes to me."

"But he spoke as if your father didn't even dictate them; as though he had even the responsibility of giving answers to his employer's son."

The motor speeded as John's foot unconsciously pressed the accelerator.

"He does have a good deal of authority —"

Two hours later, John Taylor walked thoughtfully up the drive and let himself in the carriage door. His father and mother were sitting in the library, his mother reading the newspaper aloud to Luke. She took off her glasses when John came in.

After a moment old Luke looked up and it struck the boy that his eye was cold, not at all as it usually appeared when he talked to Philip Rowe.

"Father, I've decided to go north right away," John said almost casually. "The sooner I am on the job, the sooner I'll make my start. I want to thank you again."

His mother made a little flutter of pleasure, but Luke did not stir.

He spat in the general direction of the fire and rolled a skeptical eye at his wife.

"Son, when you get on the job, think about thanks."

There was something subtly derisive in his manner.

CHAPTER III

JOHN TAYLOR's good intentions to become active at once lasted until he reached Detroit. There he dawdled a week with his friend Dick Mason and other pals, and it was not until one afternoon when he telephoned McLellan, his father's attorney, that he was stirred to action again.

"Mr. McLellan, this is John Taylor — Yes — Oh, several days — On my way to White's camp to look after logs that are there — Father gave them to me, and I thought—"

"Gave them to you!" came a rather startled voice. "What for?"

"A dowry!"

"You mean, you're going to try to do something with them?"

"Of course," vaguely alarmed by the tone. "I thought perhaps you had some suggestions."

A pause.

"By George. I haven't a suggestion to my back, John! You know the situation of course."

"Why — yes," hesitantly.

"All right. Help you out if I can; good-bye."

The situation? McLellan's voice had been rather dumbfounded. *What* situation? And his father's warning to withhold his thanks until he saw the logs — Rowe's smile when Luke first proposed the gift.

He did not like it; there was something here which alarmed him.

There was to have been a party that night, with wine smuggled from Canada, but John did not wait. He prepared to leave in a mad rush, missed the last train by minutes, and on Dick Mason's advice bought a ticket for Pancake, clear across the country from the logs. He could drive in, however, and save a day.

And so on April 5, 1920, a sleepy porter put John off at Pancake, Michigan, in the gray mist of morning.

Taylor had seen such towns as this on trips to Windigo Lodge, Dick Mason's fishing retreat on the Au Sable, hopeless little towns in the back-wash of progress. It had a main street of sand, now black and rutted by spring rains, wooden sidewalks, false-fronted stores built of wood. It boasted a court house pathetically struggling to set itself up with a measure of distinction with iron stamped to indicate red brick for sheeting, and zinc cornices of extravagant design. Beyond was the Commercial House with its sign nearly weathered away. The bank was of pressed brick and very tiny. The front windows of the office of the *Blueberry Banner* were broken and patched with yellowing newsprint. There was a livery stable with a high-stepping wooden horse hung in front, and beneath the enthusiastic equine a board painted with a word indicative of the influence which had deposed him from his once important estate: Garage.

Other thoroughfares branched from First Street and as Taylor walked toward the hotel he could see the dwellings that fronted on them. Here and there was one which pretended to be something, with a tower on one corner and gingerbread work dripping from the porches, but others were boxes only and needed paint, while numbers had never known garnishment of any sort. Beyond these

the quality and number both frayed out until off toward the jack pine which grew thinly over the country were the weather-beaten tar-paper houses of the Michigan pine barrens.

One other passenger had arrived with John, he noticed, when halfway across the street. This was a big man with a broad-brimmed hat, an unbuttoned coat, showing a heavy watch chain and charm. His eyes were blue and sunny, his skin rough and red, mouth large. He emanated good nature and when he said by way of greeting, "We should grab the worm this morning, neighbor," John grinned and remarked that they were early enough.

No one was astir on the street, though every chimney belched breakfast smoke. Within the office of the Commercial House a gaunt man, smoking a pale cigar, was putting wood in the base burner as John and his companion entered.

"Hello, Jim," he said to the big man, coughing from his cigar smoke.

"Morning, Henry. Every little thing settin' pretty?"

"Sure is."

Henry rattled the stove dampers, while Jim dropped his bag and walked behind the desk. John noticed that this fixture was a portion of an old bar and that the floor before it was pitted with innumerable fine holes, the marks left by boots of rivermen, gone now, like the timber and the saloons. Jim took a packet of letters from a shelf behind the desk and rummaged through them, sorting those that were for him. Then he retired to a chair by the stove and began opening envelopes. The proprietor — the man with the cigar — went behind the desk, slapping his hands together to cleanse them.

"Do you wish accommodations?" he asked in a low voice, evidently desiring to leave Jim undisturbed with his mail.

"Breakfast, anyhow; probably that will be all." John signed the register. The other looked at his signature. "I'd like to get out to White's camp today. Maybe you can tell me who'll take me."

The man shook his head.

"Ain't been up in th' hardwood all winter," he confessed still in that half tone. "When he gets through with his mail," — a nod toward Jim — "Mr. Harris can tell you. He knows."

"What? What's that?" Harris looked up from his letter.

"This man wants to get to White's camp, Jim."

Harris removed his gold-rimmed eye-glasses and looked more closely at John. Behind the genial quality in that gaze was appraisal, a cunning, that Taylor had not sensed earlier.

"Up in Lincoln township," he said, "away at th' other end of the county. The livery can take you up." He replaced his glasses and shook the fold from the letter he read. Then: "White's gone."

"Gone?" startled.

"Yup. Camp's abandoned. Want to see him?"

John heard his own voice say: "No, I'm only interested in what he's been doing."

His heart sank. If White was gone, where were his logs, and how was he to get them out? Or had there ever been logs? He wanted to blurt out questions, but he could not; this was his business, his first business; and he had been so sure that it would all be simple. To ask questions would

admit doubt; he would not do that to himself, let alone to strangers.

Harris went on with his mail. Henry puttered quietly. A door opened in a few minutes and a blowsy blonde appeared.

"Breakfast's ready," said Henry, and Taylor and Harris went into the dining room.

They were the only guests and sat at the same table, and Harris, after glancing at the head-lines of a Detroit paper, put it aside. He winked at the girl when she put butter at his plate, and she smiled with lumbering coyness.

"You got back for 'lection, I see," she observed.

"Yup."

"Seems like we can't do nothin' important without you, any more, Mr. Harris."

"Hope you'll never do anything *rash* without me!" he drawled in his big voice, and the girl giggled with a mixture of confusion and delight.

Breakfast came on. John had selected the best from the girl's chant, but Harris had half a grapefruit and, later, a palatable-looking steak; neither of these had been offered Taylor.

The two talked in desultory manner. Rain pattered the window and passed, and the day brightened.

The proprietor came into the room.

"The auto livery is open, Mr. Taylor," he said. "Shall I tell 'em you want to make a drive?"

"Thanks, yes."

In a moment he looked up to find Harris' eyes on him with a knowing smile.

"So, you're young Taylor," he said and grinned.

"Taylor is my name and I am young." John smiled; this man made one feel comfortable.

"You're Luke Taylor's boy?"

"I am."

"Well, well — Who'd thought it!"

"And how did you know it?"

"Why you're a Taylor an' you're headed for White's camps to look after those logs, I suppose. Everybody here knows the trick that was turned on your daddy. Say, Taylor, that was a shame!" shaking his head. "I expect your daddy 'll put the screws on White."

John said nothing; nothing of which he was conscious. He mumbled a few words and went back to his breakfast, not for nourishment, but for refuge from his own confusion. A trick, the man had said! Harris talked on, a genial ambler in conversation, drifting from logs and lumber to an odd assortment of topics, and when they left the dining room, they smoked together in the office.

It was noon before Taylor got under way. Harris took him to the garage where a narrow-faced boy wielded a wrench over the motor of a decrepit Ford. On the street men greeted Harris as good inferiors address a genial master.

"Yes," the boy said, he would make the trip when he had his motor working.

"If anybody can make her turn over, Lucius is the boy," said Jim.

"You Godam know it," tittered Lucius.

Harris went his way. "Got to vote," he explained. "If you get over here again be sure and look me up, Taylor."

"Who's Harris?"

It was the first question John put to his driver as they

rattled out of Pancake and took the ruts of the sand road that led straight north.

"Jim? Oh, he's lawyer for Chief Pontiac Power. You know about th' dam? No? Hell, they've got th' biggest dam in th' world right here in this county."

"No!"

"Well, th' biggest in Michigan — or this part of it anyhow," the youth qualified. "Chief Pontiac Power an' Light put it in ten years ago. They shoot juice clear down to them big towns like Saginaw and Flint. Jim, he runs things. Fine feller, Jim, an' he sure makes the dough."

Lucius had further praises for Harris, but John paid little attention. It was evident that unless he wanted continual loquaciousness in his ear it would be well to be chary with questions.

Beyond Pancake was nothing; literally nothing, no farms, no houses, no fences. The road was simply two deep ruts in the thin June grass sod and red brown moss, and wound on interminably across the monotonous Michigan pine barrens, or, as the natives call them, the plains. Here and there stood patches of jack pine, at times many acres in extent. Again it was oak, with some sizeable trees and much brush; in other places native poplar and balm of Gilead; birch and soft maple rose on ridges; in the distance was the blue-green of swamps. All about stood stumps, big stumps, close together, rotted by time and blackened by fire, ugly and desolate, but marking the places where within the generation mighty pine had reared their ragged plumes in dignified congregation. The same black that was on the stumps was on living trees, too; whole halves had been eaten from the butts of oak by creeping flames; smaller oaks, fire-killed, stood black and

dead, while a clump of fresh brush rose from the living roots. Poplar and birch grew up through a tangle of punky, brittle trunks that had been trees not so long ago, that had given up life before fire and had finally fallen among their growing progeny.

From ridges, Taylor could see miles of this. They dropped down into sweeping valleys of the same thing. Now and then would be a patch of country with nothing but grass among the stumps, and that, in this early month, was dead and gray. There were no stones in the road, little gravel in sight, and here and there, where the sod was broken, yellow sand showed, streaked with black where the charcoal of countless ground fires had settled into the light soil. In places were lonely Norway pines, watchers over this devastation, and occasionally the blackened corpses of mighty trees still reared themselves high, without limb or branch, straight, slim and tall, like great exclamation points set there to emphasize the ruin that was where a forest had been.

"You from Detroit?" Lucius asked. John assented. "That's where I am goin' b' God. Nothin' here for a young feller; I'm practicin' up at th' garage so I can get a good job in Detroit. It gets darned awful lonesome, but I ain't got much longer to stay here."

"I don't suppose Pancake is very lively."

"Naw! Nobody but old folks an' little kids there. Why, I'm th' only young feller in town. All th' rest beat it; every mother's son-of-a-gun. You see," growing profound, "there ain't nothin' here to hold us. Up yonder's some hardwood lands, an' that's th' only soil worth a damn in th' county, an' who wants to farm when you can work in a factory? I like the woods myself, but there

ain't any camps any more, 'cause they've cut all th' stuff off.

"You bet your life I'm goin' to Detroit. I'd'a' went last summer but a darn fool warden pinched me an' I had to hang around. Jim Harris got me off, but it took a long time."

"Why did he arrest you?"

"Oh, I dropped a cigarette out here in summer an' started a fire that run over a little no-account brush — thousand acres he said — an' he held me under the fire law. Damn fresh guy, he was, who don't know no more about these here plains than I do about diamon's. Started in arrestin' everybody that set a fire, an' got everybody sore on him."

"No use stopping fires, is that it?"

"Hell, no! He claimed if you kep' 'em out, trees would grow, but we all know damn well fire'll get in sooner or later, an' that th' soil's so poor it won't grow nothin' nohow. There's some that says it'll grow timber again, but they're just plain ignorant." He laughed.

"Why, there was a guy named Foraker who used to talk a lot about raisin' timber like a crop. Everybody knows he was wrong. He bought a big piece up ahead here, ten — twelve thousand acres, an' spent all he could get his hands on tryin' to grow pine, but it won't work. Everybody knows that. We called him Foolish Foraker an' called his land Foraker's Folly. He sunk a lot of money puttin' fires out an' growin' pine trees to plant."

"And they wouldn't grow?"

"They won't grow fast enough! It'd take a thousand years to grow trees like them stumps. Oh, they've got some scraggly little pine up here. Foraker's dead, but his daughter, she lives there. She's had some swamp land

that kept her goin', but she's in debt an' would have been starved out by now, if it wasn't for the professors that come in here."

"Professors?"

"Yup." Lucius nodded and laughed. "They come up from th' college at Ann Arbor. Damn fools, all of 'em! Got a good eye for women, though!" He laughed and turned an obscene leer on his passenger. "Oh, she's got along; got to hand it to her — She's stuck on herself an' won't mix with common folks. Good reason, too. She don't want anybody to know what kind she is. Ha! Feller up here named Sim Burns — he's runnin' for supervisor in 'lection today — got stuck on her an' she wouldn't have him; so he tries to strong-arm her an' she run him off th' place with a wolf she's got. That kinda discouraged th' rest of th' boys, but we all know how she —"

He went on with his dirty gossip. They swung to the right, into a wide valley and came upon the first indication of life and progress in a half-dozen miles. Wire fences paralleled the road, winter wheat made a vivid splash in the drabness, windmills rose from the flat lands, the country was dotted with buildings and in the foreground rose a huge red barn, on its hipped roof, in great white letters, the legend:

"Headquarters; Harris Development Company."

"Here are farms," said Taylor, thinking of what the boy had said about the land. Lucius nodded and smiled knowingly. "Is this the same Harris?"

"Yup, an' this's his graft."

"Graft?"

"Sure. He got this land for nothin' an' is sellin' it for somethin'."

They passed a tar-paper house, with sagging window frames and gaping doors; behind it stretched small fields which had been cleared of stumps, but which were now grown up to the sparse June grass. Fences were broken and some of the posts had been burned as they stood. A man was plowing half a mile away; in another direction a pile of freshly pulled stumps smouldered.

"Jim's a money maker," Lucius volunteered. "You see, when Chief Pontiac got their damn sites they had to take a lot of this here plains from th' lumber company, so Jim takes it from th' comp'ny an' sells it out to suckers."

"I see."

"Yup. He's a sellin' fool, too! They come in an' starve out an' quit, an' it ain't long before he's sold th' place again."

"But over there" — pointing to the wheat, beside which grew young fruit trees and behind which spotted cattle grazed — "that looks good."

Again Lucius laughed in his superior manner and winked, as though he conferred a great favor by his familiarity.

"Sure, that's headquarters. That's what th' suckers see what can grow on light land. What they don't see is th' train loads of high-priced fertilizer Jim brings up, an' what they don't know is that he has a devil of a time to make a showin' in two or three fields even at that. If they ever get roads and schools in here, his sucker business 'll be better. An' you watch Jim! He'll get 'em!" He giggled.

The car rattled on. They passed a house close to the road where a man worked at a broken windmill.

"Sometimes, a fella fells sorry for th' suckers at that," admitted Lucius. He waved his hand and the man

responded listlessly. "Take Thad Parker, there; he's had hard luck. He come from the city to get rich on a farm. Jim soaked him right, he did, but Thad thought he knowed it all. Now he's most starved out an' his wife's sick. Still, you can't blame Jim. Money's all that counts."

Yes, thought Taylor, money is all that counts. He stirred uncomfortably on the uncomfortable seat, however.

They left the settlement and wound on through the scrub oak and pine.

"What in hell!"

The motor stopped with a jolt and a sputter. Lucius crawled out and lifted the battered hood and scratched his head and sighed.

"Well, we got to do it over again," he said.

Taylor got out too, annoyed by the delay. Lucius brought out tools; then quite cautiously, with a twinkle in his eye, he produced a bottle filled with a brown liquid.

"Have a little shot in th' arm?"

Taylor took the bottle and smelled it suspiciously.

"What is it?"

"Little of my private stock. Good stuff. Go to it."

John declined, but Lucius drank deeply and smacked his lips. There was little John could do to help. His driver alleged that he knew the difficulty and could remedy it at once and began to dismantle the motor while John strolled about, climbed a near ridge and stood looking across that stretch of desolation. It was very quiet and lonely. A red-tailed hawk hunted in high, wide circles, coming from afar and going out of sight with no evidence that his vigilance had been rewarded. There were no birds, no small animals; wind made the only movement.

In his leather coat, high-laced officer's boots, smoking a cigarette in an amber holder, John Taylor looked much out of place as he stood on that ridge. He felt out of place, too. The dirty little town, the dreary people, the coarseness beneath Harris' geniality, the unavoidable gabble of the amiable Lucius, the mystery gathering about his errand, all combined to depress and make him apprehensive —

"All grubbers!" he muttered. "Grubbers — with no chance — except Harris; and he has to live with them!"

He threw away his cigarette with a grimace and walked back to the car.

Lucius was not drunk; not yet. He claimed to have located the trouble and Taylor watched him work so closely that he did not see the old man coming out of a side road until he was at his elbow.

"Hello there, Charley Stump!" cried Lucius.

John looked up. A ragged ancient, with gray hair and watery eyes stood by him. He was resting on a bicycle, or at least a part of a bicycle. The handle bars were bent and twisted; the frame was rust flaked. In place of a saddle a wadded gunny sack was bound to the seat post. There were no tires on the splintered rims, but quarter-inch rope had been wound around and around them.

"Hello, Lucius," quavered the old man. "Broke down, eh? That's where a safety comes in handy," stroking the handle bars. "So long as you go a safety goes."

"That bike won't go a hell of a ways."

"True, true, Lucius; when I get my tires though, you watch me scorch!"

"You've been talkin' about tires ever since the winter of the blue snow."

"True, true, but wait till I sell some of my land or until I sue some of these here trespassers. Then I'll have tires for her."

Lucius said no more, being occupied with a refractory cotter pin.

John looked again at the crazy figure, his torn mackinaw, patched overalls and rubbers that were bound to his sockless feet by twine. About the face was a look that was nothing less than guilt. It was as though Taylor's casual inspection had charged the old man with some misdeed.

"You lookin' for land, mister?"

"No, no land."

"I got some good land, if you are. Fine land; I'll sell reasonable, too."

"Paul Bunion himself couldn't stir up a dust on your land, Charley," said Lucius.

"Is that so? That's all you know. You'll get too flip sometime an' somebody'll give it to you in th' neck." With that retort Charley started on, pushing his safety, moving slowly.

"Batty in the knob," said the boy. "Pushes that bike all over the plains, an' has for years. He's an old bully-boy an' went cookoo when th' pine give out. That's what a young feller has to associate with here; that's one reason I'm goin' to Detroit. Le's have a drink."

John tried to protest, but Lucius showed temper and the attempt to dissuade him was not pressed. He drank and went on with his work.

Afternoon and the bottle were both nearly gone when the last bolt went into place and the motor responded to a turn of the crank. Taylor took the wheel in spite of the boy's remonstrance and they went on.

"All righ' fer you," whined Lucius. "I know who you are; I'm glad White put one over — Lemme drive an' I won't be glad — 's tis, I am!"

So this backwoods moron, even, knew something about his affairs that John Taylor did not know and for a moment his apprehension mingled with the chagrin of one left outside an open secret.

The car functioned as well as one of its age and condition of servitude could possibly do. They climbed the ridge and slid down the far side. Lucius drank again and leaned heavily against the other and insisted that their destination was not far.

A train paralleled their course and soon they came in sight of buildings; a scattering of tar-paper houses, with a small water-power mill on a damned creek. A saw whined within and two Indians were loading pulp wood into a gondola on the siding. There were piles of thin lumber and banks of small logs.

"That's her mill," said the boy.

"Whose?"

"Helen Forsakersh — Her mill."

"Which way now? The road forks."

"Keep lef' — lef'—."

They turned, crossed the head of the mill pond and plunged into the gloom of thick timber. At first Taylor paid little attention, for there was the usual mixture of oak, poplar and small pines. The road was straight and even and had been plowed. The oak disappeared, the trees became larger; he craned his neck to look up and grunted in surprise. He was in a dense pine forest, silent and fresh and bearing no evidence of fire. He slowed the car and looked out curiously. They were small trees,

averaging somewhere near a foot in diameter, he thought, but they were thick and uniform. The trunks were not smooth; many dead branches protruded there, as nature pursued her slow method of pruning. There was little brush on the ground.

"Is this Foraker's Folly?" he asked.

Lucius roused with a start. "Yup — Damn fool. — *She's* a lulu though!"

They crossed what appeared to be another road, also straight and plowed, but in it were no worn ruts. Soon they crossed another and another, placed at regular intervals. And then they ran out of the gloom, into sight of the Blueberry River which swooped at them, imprisoned between high banks, and a house, first story of logs and the second thatched with shingles, wide-windowed, generous of chimney, which stood on a knoll against the deep green of white pine. There were other buildings about, several of them, but the road led straight to the door of the big house.

"Here; we're in wrong," growled Taylor and set the brake, stopping at the corner of the building, not far from a dog kennel, from the depths of which two orange lights glowed at him. He shook the boy roughly and roused him.

"Where are we?"

The other yawned.

"I'll be son-gun — Brought you right to her housh!"

"Get out then, and let me out — I'll have to find the way for myself."

Lucius grumbled as John took him by the shoulder and shoved him to the ground.

"Leggo me!"

"If I do you can't stand up. You're drunk and a fool."

"Who saysh I'm drun'? Drun', am I?"

With a lunging jerk of his body he tore free and staggered backward, swearing, and then from the kennel where two glowing spots had been, came a gray streak, a ragged growl, a flash of bared teeth, white as frost.

Taylor leaped forward to grasp the boy, but again he twisted out of his reach. The dog left the ground in a long leap. John saw the red of its open mouth, caught the wicked glitter of the eye, and his foot shot out, hard and true, toe landing on the jaw, turning the creature up and over, flinging it hard upon the ground on its back.

"Get out of the way!" he said, and this time fastened his fingers in Lucius' sweater, jerking him toward the car, and stepped back himself as the dog came through the air, straight at his own throat, and reached the end of the chain, and went back and down with a choking roar of dismay.

Taylor turned to confront Lucius who had settled down on the running board, hot words on his lips and anger in his face. But he did not let the oath slip out, for a girl stood before him, a bare-headed girl in a red mackinaw, red in her cheeks, a flash in her eyes.

"That was uncalled for," she said evenly.

There was no anger in her voice; that was steady and cool and of splendid quality, but there was anger in her eyes. Another thing was there: an impersonal superiority. She gave Taylor the impression of an individual of consequence being annoyed by something trivial.

"I'm sorry I had to kick your dog," John said, "but the Providence that looks after fools and drunkards seemed to have turned its back. He got in your dog's way."

She followed his gesture to the drooping Lucius and saw the silly leer in his eye.

"I didn't understand. I only saw you step in to kick her. I'm sorry I was so abrupt."

But she was not sorry, Taylor felt. She did not care whether she had done him an injustice or not; she walked past him, speaking gently to the dog, calling her Pauguk. The animal, which had been running back and forth, muttering against her helplessness to be at the man who had struck her, sank belly to the earth when the girl approached, licking her chops swiftly, now and then darting a venomous glance at Taylor. The girl's hand was extended, the red tongue caressed it furtively and Pauguk slunk closer to her. John saw that this was no ordinary dog. Bigger, stronger, with something that dogs do not have, some curious thing which —

"Wolf!" he muttered.

"I'm sorry I come to your house and start a disturbance at once," he said icily, as the girl turned back. He scrutinized her closely and his gaze lingered on the thick hank of brown hair at her neck. Her eyes were brown, too, and wide and intelligent. "I got in here by mistake because my driver seems to have done pretty well at breaking the prohibition law."

She looked at Lucius again, but made no response; his explanation had not interested her.

"I was headed for White's camp," he went on, resenting this indifference. "He gave me the wrong turn."

When he spoke of his destination, her eyes came to his face and he fancied that a gleam of curiosity showed in them.

"You can't get there tonight," she said, holding out her

hand to feel the first drops of rain. "The camp is abandoned, anyhow."

"I suppose I'd better go back to Pancake, then."

She eyed the car dubiously.

"Between the machine and its driver, I don't think that's wise."

"Where can I go? I never saw such a God-forsaken —"

"We can take care of you." Then turned and lifted her voice: "Joe? Black Joe?"

A squat and swarthy man appeared from behind the house. He looked at Taylor, at Lucius, and then at the girl with a surly grunt of query.

"Get him out of sight before the children see him," she said. "There's an empty bunk in the shanty?"

"One."

Black Joe spit on his hands.

"Let me help you," said Taylor.

The man, stooped over Lucius, looked at him closely and slowly, from head to foot; he said nothing, but in the glance was contempt and hostility. He grasped the boy by one arm and ankle, slung him over his shoulder and walked away.

"You'll have to come in here," the girl said, moving toward the steps. "The men's shanty is crowded, and anyhow you'll — probably be better off here."

She added that last after a look which covered him as thoroughly as had the contemptuous stare of Black Joe, and her manner was as though she took upon herself dutifully the protection of an unwelcome child. It was a challenge to his assurance with women and stung his pride.

"Thanks, but you needn't bother," he said sharply.

"No bother. It is the only place," as she ascended the steps and opened the door, turning to wait for him.

He was impelled to refuse curtly this strange hospitality and sought for some retort that would sting her as she had stung him. None came, but, as he stood looking up at the girl while her eyes followed Black Joe and his inert burden into the near-by building, he smiled rather grimly. He knew women. She chose to ignore him; he would let her go to the end of her rope and bring her up as shortly as the wolf dog had brought up against her chain. He followed her into the house.

A lean, tall woman was sweeping the carpeted floor, a cloth tied over her head.

"Aunt May," said the girl, "this man is going to stay with us tonight. Will you show him the room?"

The woman also eyed Taylor sourly. The girl had drawn off her jacket and was approaching an old-fashioned walnut desk beneath a window.

"My name," he said coolly, "is Taylor. I think I know who you are."

She turned and he saw interest at last in her face. He felt no regret that to impress her he had been forced to bludgeon through her indifference with his father's identity.

"You're here, then, to look after your father's logs?"

"Yes," and the satisfaction he had derived by shaking her aloofness was engulfed in apprehension again.

"Well," said the older woman testily, "do you want to stand here and gas or put that satchel away?"

After the girl's manner this grumpiness was burlesque. Taylor grinned and followed her across the room to the open stairway.

CHAPTER IV

Two hours later Taylor stood alone before the hearth and looked about at that strange room. The walls were lined with shelves, and most of the shelves were heavy with books and pamphlets. The books were not the sort he had ever seen. There was little fiction, and that tucked in high places; some history, some other usual books, but these were all lost in row after row of technical volumes on chemistry, soils, and whole shelves of texts on silviculture. There were many works in French and German, all on forests and their products. The pamphlets came from every part of the country, from the Forest Service at Washington, from the offices of State Foresters, Tax Commissions and Congressional Committees. There was a set of books from the Bureau of Corporations, a set from Pennsylvania, one from Canada. A file of the *Forestry Quarterly* was placed next a row of copies of the *Journal of Forestry*, and below that was a set of technical forest papers from British India. A set of shelves was stacked with lumber trade journals, the backs of many checked with blue marks evidently indicating important references.

Then there were circular sections of tree trunks which had been polished until the rings stood out sharply. Except for size they all looked alike to him and he did not pause for long before them.

The wall in which the fireplace was set was without shelves and on it were hung curious charts. There was

one map of Blueberry County with an area set off in a broken blue line. That, he thought, must be the forest, Foraker's Folly. It comprised nearly half of one township. There were charts which he could not decipher; they looked like statistical reports in graphic form, but the legends were in symbols and they yielded him no information.

The flat-topped desk was in poor order, but the accumulated papers bore no dust, evidence that they were much handled. There was an old swivel chair at the desk with the leather worn from its cushions. The remainder of the furniture was largely old-fashioned and of long service. He looked about the walls again scratching his chin in perplexity, and his eyes struck one other object which he had missed, a photograph in an oval frame. It was the face of a young man, and taken years ago. A flowing beard covered the expanse of shirt front, a mop of dark hair was brushed back from the brow. That brow was wide and the eyes, though the reproduction was dulled by age, possessed the light of great intelligence. It was a good face, a sensitive face, the face of a kindly dreamer, and in it was something of the dignity which had been in the face of Helen Foraker as she talked with him outside the door.

He dropped into an armchair and stretched his feet before the fire.

Rain slashed across the windows steadily and the rising wind moaned in the trees, dropping now to a disconsolate murmur, growing again to a sob, and this cry of weather in pine tops struck a responsive chord of uneasiness in Taylor. Events of the last two days had created a growing doubt in him; the uncongeniality of

his surroundings was depressing, and as he sat there the thought of Marcia recurred to him and for the first time his sense of obligation to her became conscious responsibility. She wanted the things that money could give; she trusted him to get them for her, and he was suddenly aware of the responsibility that devolves upon a man when he promises happiness to a woman.

He had been confident enough that this errand was but a brief preliminary step, that by it he would win his father's confidence, and that the remainder would be simple. Now he was not so certain. Difficulties might be ahead, and if he failed—He rose and paced the bear-skin rug. Money and how to get it! The goal and the problem of his kind! A door opened and Helen Foraker appeared. He stopped his pacing.

"We will eat now, Mr. Taylor."

He saw a table laid, with Aunt May and children standing by it. He saw, too, that when she bade him come to her board a portion of the indifference which had marked her was absorbed by a show of graciousness.

He entered the dining room.

"Mr. Taylor, this is Bobby Kildare and his sister Bessy."

The little girl, who was no more than three, advanced and courtesied gravely. The boy, twice her age, face shining from recent soap, grinned self-consciously as he put out a warm hand. Aunt May did not look at John, but busied herself with Bessy's bib. At first, there was a constrained silence about the table. Aunt May poured tea and gestured reproof to Bobby whose appetite was stronger than his sense of manners. Helen served and commented indifferently on the storm.

"I understand you're interested in conservation, Miss Foraker," Taylor said.

Her gaze flashed to him as though she expected to find ridicule in his face, held a moment, and, not finding it, she smiled faintly.

"Most people who are doing what is usually called conservation work don't like the word. It suggests holding out, a setting apart. Growing new forests is what my father called national life insurance. They are not to be held out of use forever, but to be used when ripe and ready for market."

She spoke quickly with assurance, and yet with abstraction as one will who is accustomed to repeating a maxim for the unschooled.

"Your father was rather a pioneer in reforestation, I take it."

She nodded. "A pioneer in this country, at least. This is the first fairly big hand-grown forest we have."

"It surprised me. I had no idea it was so far along."

"Most people who stop in Pancake have little idea of what is here."

"I understand that. I heard about your pine on the way out."

"With embellishments, I presume?"

"Plenty," he laughed.

Silence. Helen spoke to the other woman and to the children, but displayed no inclination to talk further with Taylor, which nettled him. He cast about for another conversational entry and finding none urged:

"I'm interested. Where did your father get his idea? How long ago did he make his beginning?"

"Aunt May, give Bessy some more potato, will you?"

"The idea came to him like all big ideas come to big men, I suppose," turning to John, "out of an appreciation of coming necessity. He had made some money in pine. He came on this tract a year or so after the last of the original pine was cut. It was naturally protected from the fires that always followed logging, by the river, swamps, hardwood and a chain of lakes, and no fire of consequence had been in here. He saw the seedlings coming up so thickly, knew that the land had produced splendid pine once, and believed it would again. He bought the piece, kept fires out, went abroad to see how Central Europe had grown its own forests, and put in the rest of his life making this land produce its second crop.

"That was in the middle seventies when he started. The growth is nearly fifty years old now. Foraker's Folly had become an old story and a stale joke to the locality, and very few people outside are interested enough to find out about it."

A burst of wind set the forest moaning.

"Your father had a great deal of courage," Taylor began and the girl looked up with something like appreciation. That died, however, when he added: "But that's a long time to wait for a return on your investment."

"Yes," she said, and in the response was marked coolness.

The outer door opened and Helen looked over her shoulder.

"What is it, Joe?"

The short man crossed the room and stood in the doorway, wet cap in his hands.

"Tell her," he said, "that Milt couldn't get any bacon from Raymer."

The girl turned to Aunt May and said gravely:

"Milt couldn't get any bacon at the mill, Aunt May."

The gaunt woman grunted and her eyes flashed.

"Tell him," she said, "that the baby trap needs a new stake an' I want it in by morning. I can't chase younguns all day long."

"Joe, the baby trap needs a new stake. Will you get it in tomorrow?" Helen asked.

"First thing," promised Joe.

He waited a moment, then turned and went out.

Taylor looked at Helen and stole a swift glance at Aunt May. Nothing in their faces gave the key to this strange procedure. He stirred in his chair and smiled, and then attempted to start talk. He could not break the girl's reserve, however; he extended himself in the effort; she was coolly courteous, that was all. He could not make her respond and with his repeated failures his impulse to rouse her interest grew strong. He had the evening before him, he told himself; he would take her measure before he slept!

But there was no opportunity for that. When they left the table, Taylor lighted a cigarette and stood before the fire while the girl went to the telephone and for twenty minutes her talk was a jumble of queries, orders, comments which meant little to him: an inventory of lath was mentioned, the billing of cars of pulp wood, reference to a new band saw, memoranda hastily made, talk of a sick horse and regret that the man, Milt, must spend the night with the animal.

She hung up the receiver finally. She did not even look at Taylor but sat at the desk and lighted a student lamp which stood there.

"I hope you won't think we're inhospitable," she said, as though it did not matter greatly what he thought, "but this is a busy time of year."

He felt himself flushing. This was dismissal with no opening for argument — and after he had planned to make this girl come to time. He found himself walking toward the stairway, muttering about letters he wanted to write, feeling driven out and inferior and furious. He watched the girl as he ascended. She was sorting papers rapidly and did not even glance at him, John Taylor, who knew all about women and who had dedicated this evening to making her regret that she had patronized him and been indifferent.

CHAPTER V

AN hour passed. John sat at the table in his room, paper before him, pen idle in his hand. The room was heated by a grating in the floor which gave into the room below where the girl sat, and from time to time the creak of her chair or the rustle of papers came up to him. Beyond those sounds and the talk of the pines outside, there was no break in his solitude. Then a car came, stopping in front of the house, and a rap sounded on the door.

Helen Foraker rose to open it. A tall man with a thin red nose, a stoop, a celluloid collar and small greedy eyes stood on the step, a package under his arm.

"What do you want, Sim Burns?" she asked, but did not move to bid him enter.

"Evenin'," and his eyes shifted to the interior, swinging back to her face when he saw that the room was empty. "I want to talk to you."

She did not reply at once, but her eyes which were in shadow held on his; she saw the bronze of his face deepen, but he did not go on with his errand; not even when she said impatiently: "Yes?"

"It's nothin' I can say in a minute. I'd rather come in."

She stepped back and let him enter, closing the door behind her and watching the man as he unbuttoned his overcoat and shook the water from it.

"You don't need to stand by the door, Miss Foraker. I ain't goin' to hurt you."

"I'm sure of that. Sit down."

"Th' last time I was here, you didn't ask me to sit down."

"You remember very well."

"Yeah. If you thought I was goin' to forget, you was fooled. Remember? I'll say I do!" He laughed shortly and licked his lips; his glittering eyes were steady on her face and most unpleasant. "That's why I'm here tonight, because I remember and want you to remember. — I told you that day I wouldn't forget, that you'd see th' time when you'd wish you'd gone a little slower."

A flush whipped across the girl's face but she did not speak; only settled her lips in a tighter line and watched him expectantly.

"I give you all the show there was," he went on bitterly; "I come here like an honest man would; I offered you a good home an' a respected name, an' when you wouldn't have any of me you wasn't satisfied to turn me down, but had to set your damned dog on me an' spread th' story to th' country."

He swallowed vehemently.

"You may recall," she said evenly, "that it was necessary to turn Pauguk on you to avoid — ugly things."

"Yeah. That's what you think. I wouldn't touched you, wouldn't hurt a hair of your head. Didn't I come here to ask you to marry me?"

"I gathered that. You were drunk."

He fidgeted a moment before her scorn, then burst out: "That ain't what I come for, to go over all that again. I just wanted to remind you that I said then you'd live to regret it. Well, you have."

He hitched the package under his arm closer against his side and tapped it.

"That's th' poll books of Lincoln township. I'm takin' 'em to Pancake tonight so they can canvass th' vote in today's election. Know what they'll find? They'll find that Sim Burns is supervisor."

"I expected so. You were unopposed."

"Unopposed! An' I'd 've won anyhow; I'd 've won if it was th' last thing I ever done, because ever since that time when th' story about you an' your dog an' me got around I've lived just to pay you back." His voice mounted as he moved closer to her, head on one side, arm extended in an accusing point. "By bein' supervisor, I'm tax officer of this town; by bein' tax officer I hold you an' your forest in my power! Like that! Now, do you understand?" He opened his long bony fingers to their limit and closed them slowly as though they strangled a hated life.

One of Helen Foraker's hands, which had hung limp at her side, moved ever so slightly, some of the color went from her face and in place of her scorn appeared a flicker of misgiving.

Burns remained tense a moment, then relaxed suddenly and laughed again.

"I guess you get me," nodding slowly. "You seen fit to run me off your place. Now I'll see fit to tax you out of th' county!"

"There's only one reason your old man an' you got by this far. Your father was laughin' stock for th' old county officers. They'd told him so often that he was a fool and couldn't grow pine that they got to believing it. They rode him so hard that they couldn't believe any other way an' save their faces. So naturally they couldn't run up his taxes, 'cause if they did, they'd admit that they

was wrong, an' men don't like to do that — specially after they've made so much noise about bein' right.

"None of 'em was any more down on you than Tom Burns, my own uncle. None of 'em ridiculed any harder than he did. He'd been supervisor from Lincoln township since I can remember. Now he's dead, an' I'm in his place an' I aint afraid to step out an' tell the world an' Blueberry County that these old men have been wrong; that you *can* grow timber, that you have grown timber, an' that now, by God, you're goin' to pay for the privilege of growin' it in this county!"

His voice had risen to a thin cry and his eyes blazed churlish triumph.

"Yes, it is likely you can do that, if you want to," she said, measuring each word, thinking desperately. "It has been done before. The last stick of hardwood in the county was taken off last winter because you men taxed the owner to the point of financial failure. All over the country logging camps are slaughtering timber to keep ahead of taxation. You may start that with me if you see fit; you may not get very far, but — "

"Oh, I know Humphrey Bryant's behind you! I know he's tryin' to turn the timber taxation upside down at Lansing. Let me tell you, girl, I'll snap my fingers in Hump' Bryant's face. He's got to get elected to th' Senate again before he can help you an' he ain't so much a fox as he thinks he is. I'll have your assessment on th' rolls in a week; I'll have you whipped before th' first of th' year because you drove me off, with your wolf bitch!"

He forced the last words through set teeth. The girl, backed against the door, breathed rapidly as he advanced.

"Unless you'll listen to reason," voice lowering to a

whine. "Unless you'll make a new start with me. Unless you —"

"Sim Burns, you —"

"Forget it!" His hand whipped out to grasp her wrist as anger leaped into her eyes. She struggled against his clutch.

"Let go!"

"Let go, hell! Choose now! It's one or the other: me an' your forest — or neither!"

He had not heard the step on the stair. He was so centered on his strategy that he did not detect her relief and neglect to struggle.

"I think this will do."

It was John Taylor's voice close behind Burns and the man looked over his shoulder sharply, hand still clutching Helen's wrist. For a second his amazed eyes clung to Taylor's confident smile and he made no move.

"Miss Foraker has asked you to let go her arm — You will do it now."

There was a snap to the last and John dropped a firm hand on Burns' shoulder.

Sim whirled to face him.

"What's this to you," he panted, rage returning to cover his start.

"Not much, except that you are going to go away now — unless Miss Foraker wants to say more to you."

He turned to the girl, who moved away from the door slowly, as though not just certain of the strength of her limbs. She did not look at the men, but shook her head in a disgusted reply to Taylor's words.

Burns straightened and put on his hat, buttoning his overcoat haughtily.

"Don't think you're driving me out," he sneered. "I've said what I had to say 'nd am ready to go."

"Which is fortunate for you, but not so fortunate for me. I'd welcome a chance to throw you out!"

John's voice trembled on that, as a burst of dislike ran through him. He opened the door and with a quick gesture indicated the way out.

"Don't be in such a rush, young feller. I ain't quite—"

He had paused to fasten the last button of his coat, but John grasped his arm and with a yank impelled him to the threshold. Sim struggled and stopped and half turned to protest, but the door swung swiftly shut and he stepped into the rain to avoid being struck by it.

Taylor stood by the door until the car moved away. Helen had gone to her desk, seating herself weakly, supporting her head on one hand. He could see her profile, softened by the yellow glow of the lamp. She was very lovely, this beauty in distress, and he let the pride of being her defender come to full life. His chagrin at her repulses was even stronger now, for he felt that he held the upper hand. He had no genuine concern for her, no sympathy for her fright and depression. No longer would she patronize him! She would eat out of his hand, now! He moved to the desk and stood looking down at her. Helen lifted her face and met the amusement in his eyes.

"I thank you," she said. "It is lucky for me you were here."

He laughed depreciatingly and settled his weight to the corner of her desk, swinging the one leg, big hands clasped on his thigh.

"And it is lucky for me," he said, "that I was here. Helping you gave me a real thrill."

His voice was low and gentle; too low; too gentle; he leaned forward toward her and smiled and one of his hands dropped to the blotter, very close to hers, resting there lightly, as though it would move forward and cover that other hand. His smile, his tone, his manner indicated that he felt himself completely the master, and was very certain that his advance would not be repulsed this time.

The fright went from Helen Foraker's eyes. They studied his face a moment, almost abstractedly, looking down at his hand and then back to meet his gaze.

"Please don't," she said abruptly. "There is no one here to throw you out, Mr. Taylor — Besides, I didn't think you were quite that sort."

He straightened, flushing, feeling cut and whipped, like an impudent little boy who has met dignified rebuke. He had no retort, had no resources with which to bolster his poise. He tried to smile but the effort died. He cleared his throat to speak — he knew not what, then felt welcome relief as the telephone bell whirled and the girl rose to answer it.

CHAPTER VI

THE side of the telephone conversation which Taylor overheard through his confusion indicated surprise and regret. Finished, the girl turned and looked for a moment squarely at him and he flinched inwardly, for he expected that elaborate denunciation would follow, but when she spoke, she said:

"I am going to ask you to go with me on an errand of mercy. A woman is very sick a few miles away. The telephone line between them and town is down, and they have sent for me to come. I can help there perhaps, but we may need some one to send into Pancake after the doctor. There is no one here who can drive a car except you. Will you go with me?"

"Why, of course," he stammered, at once relieved and mortified to think that she should ask a favor of him in that moment.

"There isn't much time."

He hurried to his room for coat and hat and then followed Helen out of the house to a shed where her car was sheltered. It was a one-seated Ford with a box body behind in which shovels and other tools clanked and thumped as they drove through the rain. Little was said, the girl was occupied with the difficult driving, for rain streaked the windshield, and Taylor was busy with an attempt to re-establish his own assurance. He had overstepped himself, had been brought up sharply, but instead

of finding the expected resentment in this girl she had called on him for help. Strange, surely!

They left the forest behind, passed the mill with its group of shacks and skipped on along the plains road. Water which had gathered in the ruts was shot across the glare of the lights in a brief arc, the car lurched and wriggled in the twisted road and black brush lacquered by the rain reeled past. With scarcely an exchange of words they covered the distance to the Harris settlement, turned from the main road and stopped before a house.

A door opened and a man stood silhouetted in the light.

"She asked for you," he said cautiously as Helen, followed by Taylor, approached the steps. "She's just dropped to sleep."

"Could you get the doctor?"

"Sim Burns was going by," the man replied, "and I sent word by him."

Helen entered, drawing off her gloves.

"If he doesn't come in an hour, Mr. Taylor had better drive in for him. Mr. Parker, this is Mr. Taylor."

Parker closed the door and shook hands silently with John who recognized him as the man who had waved at Lucius that afternoon. His unshaven face was very white and his black eyes seemed abnormally large against its pallor.

"Doctor was here this morning," he said huskily. "He said — " He swallowed and shook his head. "He said a day or two would tell."

"Is she — Does she suffer?" Helen asked.

Tears came into the man's eyes and he looked at her helplessly.

"It's awful! I thought yesterday she was better, but

in the night she lost her head. She's — just given up."

Helen looked about the small room. It was well ordered and with a minimum of material it had been given an air of comfort, of stability.

"What can I do?" she asked.

"Nothin' unless she —"

From behind a closed door came a stirring and a weak, muffled voice:

"Thad?"

He moved quickly. "Yes, Jenny," opening the door.

"Who's there?"

"Miss Foraker."

"Oh — I'm so glad."

Helen stepped to the door. Parker took the oil lamp from its bracket and went into the bedroom where a very slight, very pale girl lay under the patch-work quilt. She was very young, and the pain, the pallor, the weakness reflected in her face could not cover completely her girlhood. When her blue eyes rested on Helen's face she tried to smile, but the result was feeble. One of the thin white hands on the cover stirred.

"I'm so glad," she whispered, "so glad you've come. I've thought about you so much — I wanted to send for you; I think you, maybe, can understand about us better than any one else."

Helen sat down beside the bed. Parker placed the lamp on the table and stood looking down at the two women, lips loose and hands limp at his sides. In the other room Taylor sat quietly near the roaring cook stove, in the shaft of light which came from the bed chamber.

"I didn't know you were so sick or I'd have been here before," Helen said very gently. The other tried to smile

again and moved the hand. Helen took it between hers and the sick girl closed her eyes peacefully. "I heard about — about the beginning, of course; I didn't know you'd had such a hard time. Perhaps the worst is behind, though; that is something to be thankful for."

Her voice was very gentle, as gentle a voice as Taylor had ever heard. He could see her stroking the hand she held and her manner was in such contrast to her former brusqueness and indifference to others that he leaned forward to watch.

The head on the pillow moved weakly in denial of the suggestion.

"It's all over," the thin voice said. "I know. The doctor knows, but he won't say it. Thad knows, but he won't give up hoping." Her husband's hand twitched, but he made no remonstrance. "He has more strength to hope than I had — I haven't any at all — now."

"Oh, that can't be —"

"It's sweet of you to try to be cheery," the thin voice interrupted, "But please don't. I haven't much strength to talk and I want to talk, because it will make me feel easier in my heart."

Color had come into her cheeks and a tell-tale brightness in her eyes. Her legs stirred restlessly.

"Ever since we came here two years ago I've wanted to know you. Ever since I found out what you are doing and what Jim Harris is doing — But I've been a little afraid — You're so busy — you have such a big job — " She coughed and waited for breath. "You're the first woman I heard about. They told me you were crazy, that your father was crazy, and at first I believed it because everybody I knew said so — Then I found

out — You're doing something with this land that no one else has the courage or the patience to do — This land which means so much and so little."

She stirred again and was silent a moment, staring at the ceiling.

"I suppose every one thinks their troubles are worse than anybody else's, so there's never been anybody to listen to ours. The people who might be friendly are in trouble themselves; the others don't care — much. I've had it bottled up in me so long and it's taken so much of my strength — the trouble, I mean — that I'll have to talk of it now if — if I'm ever going to talk."

She moved her head so she might look into Helen's face.

"You've been here long enough to know what goes on. I just want you to know that we — Thad and I — know you're right — now. Maybe there are some others who know that, too, but they won't take the trouble to say it—perhaps. We've been only nodding acquaintances, you and I, yet we've had so much in common."

In the pause the girl seemed to be thinking carefully, planning what she would say next.

"I'll have to go to the beginning — You see, this was to have been our home; our cottage, our vine and our fig tree. Thad and I worked in the same office in Chicago — we hated it, both of us, hated the city, hated the grind that didn't seem to get people anywhere but to wealth — a very few. We'd never known the country, but we used to spend our Sundays walking and we got the idea that when we married we'd like to go back to the land — "

A sound, like the shadow of a laugh, came from her troubled chest.

"Our interest made us good prospects for the sharks," the vaguest hint of bitterness creeping into the feeble tone. "Several of them came and talked and explained and worked our hopes up. Then Harris' man came. He was the most — the most competent of any of them. He had pictures of headquarters here, and pictures of prosperous farms — taken in another county, we found out afterward. They offered to pay our expenses up here to look the property over. It all sounded so good that we signed the option —"

She closed her eyes a moment and breathed quickly, gathering strength. Her husband sat down on the bed and rested a hand on one of her covered knees.

"It wasn't any option — We found that out when we got here. It was an iron-clad contract. They had our word and some of our money. We didn't know what we were getting in for, because we were only city people — who wanted to get onto the land — we gave them more money to save what we had already put in. We left our jobs and came here to live.

"At first it didn't seem so bad. It wasn't what we had expected, but we still had plenty of hope left. The land was cheap, we thought, we believed we were pioneers and were quite proud to stand the racket for the first few months. But we saw other families leaving and some staying here and starving and our land didn't yield, and the more we learned about it the less we could hope that it ever would grow crops — Little as it cost, it was very expensive —

"We were suckers, you see; suckers for the land sharks! They took our money, and we put our hope in behind the money — and it wasn't possible to get either out."

She swallowed with an effort.

"Then — when we knew a baby was coming, we didn't care so much about this failure. We thought we could get enough to eat, anyhow, and with the baby we could be happy! We planned to give it one more summer's trial and then in the fall, when I was strong enough, we'd go back to the towns where Thad could get a job, and we could begin all over again if we had to — we were young then, you see —"

Helen leaned over and stroked her brow soothingly. "And, you're still young."

The head beneath her hand moved in denial.

"Old," the woman whispered, "very old — very old, Helen. You don't mind my calling you that, do you? I've been your friend so long without knowing you.

"We had planned for the baby so! I had sewed, we had decided on the name even. We knew they couldn't put us out without months of delay; we had fire wood and a roof, and a cow, and Thad could get food somehow. Clothes didn't matter. We were going to be happy in spite of the failure.

"And then the baby — " She swallowed again and paused. "That is what made me old, Helen. If he had lived, it might have been different — But when he didn't even cry — not once — something broke inside me — and when the doctor told me I couldn't ever have another baby — you see, the last hope I had went out —"

She closed her eyes and did not open them as she said:

"I lost him because I worried so much over our mistake; I'd worried beneath the surface; I grew weak with it and thought I wasn't worrying. I lost everything with that worry, even the desire to live, finally — I — That's what

this place is: A graveyard for hopes!" Her voice was suddenly stronger. "That's what Jim Harris and all his kind are: murderers of hope! Worse than that, he killed my baby! Jim Harris," struggling to sit up. "If there ever was a man without heart or scruple, it's Jim Harris!" She sank back weakly and her fingers plucked at the quilt while she panted from the effort.

The color had gone from Helen Foraker's face then, and her brows were gathered in suffering. Her lips were set; she made no effort to speak. But once more she took the girl's hand and the cold fingers clutched hers desperately.

"We went to him when we saw the trick that had been played. He wouldn't give us back a cent — He was hard — He can be hard — He would listen, but he had so many answers, so many reasons — Legal reasons — He is so good-natured, seems to be so friendly! That is why he has this — awful success!

"Back to the land," she muttered after a pause. "Ah, such land! and if we had known, we could have gone north, just a few miles, into the hardwood cutover and made a go of it. We'd have had our cottage, our vine, our apple tree. We'd have had our baby, Thad and me — and we'd have had our hopes — our youth — And there's so much land for the land hungry; so much good land that weary city people might have if they only knew more — So much — I can't — I —"

She drew a hand across her eyes. When she spoke again, her voice was little more than a whisper.

"And even this land is good for those who have vision, for men like your father must have been, for women like you, Helen. Timber! Timber as a crop! They all said you were a fool, and I believed them, until I saw — You

have grown such a beautiful forest on this land which won't grow anything else — You've gone ahead and paid no attention to their jeers: you had the dream and a wealth of hope — They say yet — you can never pay out — But I don't believe them — They are so ignorant. I hope it all comes right for Foraker's Folly — I hope they see the wisdom in it.

"Oh, this graveyard! this graveyard of hopes! a cottage — and peace — and enough — It wasn't wealth we wanted — only peace — peace —"

For an interval the others waited, watching the rise and fall of her chest. "Peace," she whispered again and her lips formed other soundless words and then were still.

"Asleep," whispered Helen and Thad nodded, brushing his eyes.

Carefully she laid the hand she held back on the covers, rose and stepped from the room. Parker remained there, taking the chair Helen had left, bending over his wife, hands clasped on his knees so tightly that the knuckle bones seemed to threaten the skin.

In the kitchen Taylor rose when Helen tiptoed across the bare floor. She motioned him back to his seat and took a rocker which was near the stove, where the fire-light playing through the cracks fell upon her face. Her lips were still set, brows drawn, but with the sympathy and pain in her eyes was something else, a light, a determination which John Taylor had never before beheld in the face of a woman. It was something tremendous, something beyond his experience; he was not equipped to analyze it, though three hours before he had thought he knew women — Now he could only sense the power of this girl!

He found that his palms were damp with sweat and that his heart was beating rapidly. He felt useless, out of place; he was glad that none there gave him attention; he would have fled into the rain were it possible to escape unnoticed. For the first time John Taylor was looking life squarely in the face, with death leering over his shoulder. He had not wanted to grub for his money; he had come to Blueberry after an easy start toward fortune. And these people, no older than he, had been willing to grub just for peace — and had failed because Jim Harris made easy money.

For half an hour no sound came from the bedroom. Then the girl whispered her husband's name.

"Yes, Jenny?" He slipped to his knees and leaned across the bed.

"Hold me close," she whispered. "Closer! — And Thad? — Thad? — Thad?"

He looked about and shoved the door closed with one foot to exclude those others who had come to help and could not. They heard a creaking as though he drew the girl closer into his arms; they heard his voice murmuring and heard hers. Rain rattled on the roof and the thin shell of the house; wind yelped at the cornices. The steel windmill, out of gear, creaked dolefully as it moved in the blow. A distant dog barked and a cow bawled. The clock struck rapidly and ticked on. Helen filled the stove box with wood and sat down again.

"If the doctor isn't here in a few minutes," she said, "you had better go on."

"I'll be glad to. Can't I go now?"

He was eager to escape.

"No, he may be on the way, and you may be needed here."

The brisk clock and the fire made the only sounds within for no noise came from the other room, now. Headlights of a car appeared far off. Helen rose and went to the window and as she moved across the room they heard Parker stirring behind the closed door. He came out walking very slowly, stiffly, carrying the lamp. He put it in its bracket and opened the damper in the stove, moving mechanically, like a sleep walker.

"Here comes the doctor," said Helen.

Thad started as though her presence surprised him.

"Doctor?" he asked, in a croak, that made her look at him sharply.

"Oh, Jesus!" he said. "Oh, Jesus Christ — he's too late!" His legs gave under him. He sank to his knees and his weight sagged back upon his heels. His head was bowed, with clasped hands pressed against his lips. "Too late," he whispered unsteadily — "She stopped worrying — in my arms."

It was not yet midnight when Helen Foraker and John Taylor drew up before the house in the forest. They had not spoken a word on the way back, but after they entered the great warm room, Taylor lighted a cigarette and spread his hands before the fire and said dully:

"Lord, that's terrible!" And then added that which was in his mind and had been since he had heard Jennie Parker's talk. "I met Harris in Pancake this morning. I'd hate to —" He did not finish.

The girl commented dryly: "Jim Harris is one of those who don't care about waiting very long for returns on an investment."

Taylor recalled the comment he had made on her own

forest at the table that night and her words were like a lash across his face.

And at that hour, under live oaks bearded with moss, Marcia Murray sat with crossed knees under the steering wheel of her runabout. Beside her Philip Rowe lounged, a smile on his thin lips, toying with a magnolia blossom.

"Like a flake of moonlight," he said softly, holding it up against the shadows. "As white as your throat, Marcia!" He dropped the blossom and leaned toward her, arm sliding along the back of the seat.

The girl drew away. "Be cautious," she murmured.

"With you, I know no caution —"

"You did when John was here."

He frowned. "Discretion," he corrected and his glowing eyes twinkled. "I envied him."

"He has everything you want, hasn't he, Phil?"

"He has you, it seems."

"And his father's fortune?"

One of Rowe's hands ran over his chin. "Not yet," he said, and in the casual words was a degree of triumph.

The girl looked up quickly. "Old Luke *does* like you, doesn't he?"

"He likes any one who persists — and persists — and persists — With Luke as with others, persistence wins."

He leaned further toward her with that, and the smile was gone from his eyes; gone from the girl's face too, and she betrayed a flash of bewilderment, of wild guessing; the composure came back though, and when he reached for her hand again, she let her cool fingers nestle in his palm. But she did not permit him to hold her close — very close — not that night.

CHAPTER VII

THE storm ended before dawn and when John Taylor awakened it was to see a springtime sun striking through the clean green of pine, setting the drops on twig and needle blazing with the splendor of jewels.

He sat up and looked out. The Blueberry hurled itself at the high bank opposite him, red and roiled, grumbling as it was turned in its course. Upstream he saw a stretch of swamp with the slender spires of balsam standing behind dead cedar. The sound of an axe, and a man's voice, and the smell of wood smoke drifted in through his window. It was all so fresh and vigorous; he sprang from bed and drank deeply of the fine air — and then remembered.

Last night's experience hung at his heart like a cold weight. He felt older, more mature. He had seen death before, yes, but it had never come close to him as had the death of that strange girl, in hopelessness and misery. And then there were other factors. This matter of money. How Jim Harris made it seemed well enough yesterday afternoon, but a half a dozen hours later the practise had become peculiarly hideous. Also, Helen Foraker's attitude, his attempt to make a very broad bid for supremacy in the natural clash of their personalities, her rebuke and her ready dismissal of any evident ill-feeling to ask him to ride through the night with her.

It would have been less uncomfortable had she been afraid of him. It would have made him feel important,

after a manner; as it was, he felt of very little consequence.

A car approached and he heard voices, Helen's and a man's. They entered the room below as he began dressing.

"There's nothing any one can do, Milt," the girl was saying. "Some of the neighbors are there, but Thad wanted to be left alone, more than anything else. He is going to bury her there beside the house. She wanted it that way, he said." Pause.

"Sim Burns stopped at the mill last night," the man said. "He made threats."

"After he had made them to me."

"He was here?"

"Here in this room. He — Mr. Taylor saved me a scare by putting him out. He got quite — rough."

The man before her was big, with gray eyes, light hair, huge hands and the supple limbs of a man who has grown up in action.

"Talked taxation, did he?"

"Yes — that was enough."

She sank to her chair and propping her chin in her hands stared gloomily through the window. The man stepped forward quickly.

"You know what that means," he said. "You know he has it on you. There is no use trying to fight the law even if it is unjust. Can't you see that? Can't you quit before it is too late?"

She shook her head. "Don't Milt, please! I can't quit empty handed!"

"You've a fortune here now. You're gambling on a chance to lose everything and win very little more. It's —"

"It's only the beginning of the pinch. It was bound to come. We've got to go through with it!"

He leaned over, fists on the desk. "Is that all you can think of, Helen? Of the forest? Isn't there something else? Can't you think of me — just a little?"

Her face grew troubled.

"I wish you wouldn't, Milt. Love is a big, big thing; the forest is a big, big thing. I haven't time for more than one big job."

He looked at her with his jaw set strangely and after a moment breathed: "Sometimes I hate this damned forest!"

She started sharply. He moved away.

"Milt Goddard!" The man whirled then.

"I mean it," he cried. "It stands between you and me! It's all you seem to think about. It'll be years yet before you can win out, if you ever win, and those are the years I want with you. The years you need to be loved and have somebody to stand between you and trouble."

"If you hate the forest, how could you be happy with me? The forest is my life." She had risen and looked reproachfully at him. "I do need you. I do depend on you. You do stand between me and trouble. Without you as my foreman, how could I manage?"

"It might be different; I might not hate it, if it didn't stand between you and me."

"Then you don't hate it for any other reason? You are — just jealous of it, Milt?"

"Perhaps I am!" he flared. "Perhaps I'm just crazy jealous of it as I am of every other man who looks twice at you — Who's this Taylor?"

The girl lifted a hand in hopeless gesture and shook her head. "Milt, you make it so hard for yourself and me. You know who he is, and you know why he is here."

"You didn't have to take him into your house."

"There was only one bunk left and there had to be a place to let Lucius sober up."

"He could have slept in mine," surlily.

"I didn't know when he came that you would be away. And — Why, Milt, he wouldn't fit in the men's shanty! He was so out of place in his leather coat and his soft hands. He's big and strong, but after all he's only a little boy, and not the sort to be thrown with a rough crew like we have now. He's a rich man's son who has never grown up and you feel out of patience and sorry for him at the same time. Aren't you ashamed to let your jealousy make you *silly*?"

Evidently Milt Goddard was. He grumbled and complained, but in a few moments he went his way after talking about work to be done, though it was clear that his mind was yet on his frustrated love-making. Above, John Taylor had heard through the grating in the floor. At first he had been amused, but when Helen Foraker spoke of him as an inconsequential youth who needed protection a furious flush swept into his cheeks. It was still there when he descended to find the girl at her desk.

"Good morning," she said with a nod. "I took a liberty with your affairs and sent Lucius back to Pancake. I've been planning to drive into the hardwood for the last week; I can make it today and from there I have to go into town, so you may ride with me."

"That wasn't necessary," he said coolly. "I had intended to spend the day there."

"I'm sorry — I didn't want the children to see Lucius. He is their uncle, the only living relative. Aunt May who is responsible for them, doesn't like to have him

around. I waited to explain. Aunty May called you for breakfast but you didn't hear, and the children were up, so I took the responsibility."

He looked at the clock. It was seven. Helen saw the query in his face.

"We eat at dawn," she explained. "I was up a trifle earlier today because I wanted to drive to Parker's."

The fact of having overslept, coming on top of the rest, made him feel, in truth, like a little boy! She had taken him into her house because the crew in the men's shanty were rough; she had been patient when he overslept and disturbed the routine of the household. He ate alone, served sourly by Aunty May, making the meal very short, and when he left the table Helen at once rose and reached for her jacket, indicating that she had been waiting for him. As they left the house, Pauguk, belly down in her kennel, growled raggedly and shivered and half rose as though she would launch herself at the man who had kicked her yesterday.

"You'll have to watch her," Helen said. "She doesn't understand, and she doesn't forget."

They climbed to the single seat of the battered car and went north through her forest, through the ranks of pine trees, uniform in size, growing closely together, crossing those cleared strips at regular intervals. They overtook Black Joe and the car stopped while Helen talked briefly with him. He carried over one shoulder a long implement with a steel blade: a spud of some sort; and under one arm was a bundle of what looked at first to Taylor like pine twigs, but from the other end protruded roots covered with wet clay. Infant trees ready to be planted, he told himself, and catching a word in the girl's

talk he knew those lanes which made a checker-board of the forest were fire lines. The idea that this folly of Helen Foraker's was no casual happening took shape rapidly in his mind. Also, the idea that this girl was a person of consequence grew with each detail he learned of her —

They left the forest, crossed plains, climbed a ridge and came into a hardwood slashing, with limbs and branches a tangle on the ground, cordwood stacked here and there and an occasional lonely and crippled sapling standing above the ruin. The road branched, the ruts faded out, they dodged stumps and finally came to a stop.

"This is yours, isn't it?" she asked.

"Search me! I've never been here before; I was depending on finding White."

"Then you didn't even know he was gone?"

"Not until I got to Pancake."

She started to speak, but checked herself and looked at him searchingly.

"Where's the railroad?" he asked.

"Railroad? Why, the right-of-way is over yonder a half mile; the steel's been taken up."

"Taken up?"

"Didn't you know *that*?" she asked.

He shook his head. Her incredulous question seemed to take all the strength from him and he felt a sudden natural, unreasoned need to talk.

"I didn't know anything about this, it seems," he burst out. "You know and Lucius knows; Jim Harris knew, and my father's attorney in Detroit; my father himself knew and his secretary knew. I came up here to do the first piece of work I've ever tackled, so bull-

headed and cock-sure of myself that my pride wouldn't let me ask questions of anybody!"

He hitched about so he could look squarely into the girl's face.

"I've seen you less than twenty-four hours, but I've made several kinds of an ass of myself in that time!" he went on, voice trembling. "I've been sure enough of myself before yesterday. I've thought I was able to judge people and I've never felt small before any one in my life — especially women. I didn't like you from the first. I thought I'd humble you last night after I put that lout out of your house; instead of that you made me feel like a — a worm!

"I heard you tell the man you call Goddard that I was only a little boy, the son of a rich man, who'd never grown up. That got under my skin — two hours ago; but now I guess maybe you're right." He swallowed slowly.

"Is that going far enough?" he demanded. "You're the first person I've ever run up against who could make me say these things about myself. I have never believed them myself before. I thought this job was only a preliminary step and not to be taken very seriously. But it seems that it is a serious matter with me. I'm on trial with my father; if I make good here I make good with him and that means backing for whatever I may try to do in the future. I don't know what's wrong with these logs, but everybody else does know. It's my business and I'm not in the secret. Now I'm asking you, a stranger, to let me in."

He stopped as suddenly as he had begun. For a moment the girl eyed him, her whole interest awakened.

"Get out, and I'll show you," she said almost curtly.

He followed her over tops, around piles of brush, to the brink of a sharp, deep ravine. The river could be heard murmuring not far off, a partridge whirled up from their feet, and a squirrel scolded from a sapling. None of this did Taylor sense, nor was he conscious of the girl's eyes on him. He saw only logs! Logs by the hundreds; logs by the thousands, trainloads of logs! Logs on end, logs criss-crossed, logs in a wonderful, hopeless tangle at the bottom of that ravine. To right and left the depression extended; to right and left went the logs. Logs three feet in diameter; logs as small as six inches through. Logs, logs — logs — in a meaningless jumble.

"Why — Why are they *here*?"

She let one hand drop limply.

"All you knew was that logs had been left in the woods?"

"That's all."

"It's been the talk of the country," she said. "White contracted with your father to cut this forty. He went at it the last thing and was paid for the scale on the decks. He was not to get his pay until the woods were clean, but the snow went with a rush; he knew it wouldn't let him finish the haul so he dumped them here. The inspector who represented your father looked over the slash and found the woods clear. White got his money and was gone. They started taking up the railroad two weeks before this was discovered. It's thirteen miles to the main line."

A wave of hot rage swept through Taylor's body, making his face dark. He knew then what the chuckling of his father had meant; he interpreted Rowe's smirk; he reasoned out Jim Harris' comments. He knew why

Lucius and this girl had been surprised at his errand.

"Tricked!" he laughed bitterly.

"Of course you were tricked. White —"

"Not by White! White tricked my father and he passed the trick to me. This was to be my start in life. He told me I didn't know saw logs from bumble-bees, but I know enough to realize that with this mess thirteen miles from a railroad, he might as well have given me so many — worn-out shoes!"

He laughed again and drew a cigarette from his case with unsteady fingers, lighted it and broke the match savagely.

"He can have his logs!" blowing smoke through his nostrils. "He can have his logs and let 'em rot for all of me! I'll find some other way to make my beginning!"

Helen's gaze travelled down the ravine to the river, flashing in the sunlight, to the swamp on the far side with dead cedar standing against the background of her pine; but her eyes did not reach the pine; they remained close to the river's bank where a strip of white sand showed and where the sunlight glistened on the wet bark of cedar poles drying from last night's rain. There were many poles on the skids — many poles —

"A quicker way?" she asked, almost casually.

"Quicker and easier."

"And what if these logs spoil?"

"Well, what of it?" he challenged. "What's that to me?"

"Nothing, perhaps — but maybe it should be." He eyed her closely, interest in what she was driving at overcoming for the moment his anger. "Were you in the army?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Excitement, and everybody was doing it."

"Nothing more?"

"Oh — it was up to me."

"Because we were all in trouble. Yes. We are all going to be in trouble again before long if people go on wasting logs and the opportunities to grow more logs." He shrugged his shoulders indifferently, but she did not appear to notice. "We have only a fifty-year cut of virgin timber left in this whole country. Trees are second in importance only to food. What are we going to do when it is gone?"

"Fifty years is a long time away."

"Europe was three thousand miles away."

"Say, what are you getting at?" he demanded.

"Two things: The first is, that saving these logs is a necessary thing; not perhaps, for you and me, but for the country we live in. It's only three hundred thousand feet or so, but it's going to save just that much standing timber if it's made use of. And the next is that I have from my father a natural fear of waste — waste of material and waste of men and women." He removed his cigarette and flicked off the ash absently. "You admitted back in the car that you had never done anything you can point to. You're about twenty-five years old, aren't you? You have already commenced to go to waste —"

"I'm through, though! I'm —"

"You're dodging the first job because it is hard."

"No, because they tried to trick me."

"And if you give up they'll succeed." He arrested the cigarette on its way back to his lips. "Don't you see that?"

The laugh will be on you, then. Maybe you'll do better in a small sense to give this up and try something else. Your father gave you these logs, I take it, because he thought you would fail. If you do fail you're wasting an opportunity to show him, among other things, that his joke was cruel, aren't you?"

"I'll show him yet, in some other way."

"But what about your pride?"

"Haven't any."

"Only a few moments ago you told me that you hadn't asked about this open secret because you were too proud. You didn't like to think yesterday that people wouldn't make a fuss over you." He frowned, letting his eyes run over the ravine. "Isn't there something to what I say? Haven't you a great deal of pride?"

A new emotion was stirring in young John Taylor. He was in a corner, without argument. He was trying to slide around the obstacle directly in his path, looking for an easy way out — and he *was* proud; but in this hour he had become humble and more honest with himself than he had ever been before.

"Maybe I have," he said, "but what can I do? Here are the logs; the railroad is gone, they'll spoil before snow."

"Whatever is done must be done at once." Her eyes travelled again down to the river and rested on the decks of cedar poles. "Do you want to try to turn this joke on your father, and do something hard and to be a pretty good American in peace times by saving this timber?"

"Will you show me the way?" he asked sharply.

She smiled and shook her head.

"I don't know the way. I have an idea, but maybe

it won't work. First, though, I want you to go to Pancake and put it up to the best logger you can find in town. If he has an idea, consider it; if he hasn't, maybe I can help."

He pulled the cigarette from its holder and dropped it upon the ground. His face was flushed, lips parted in a smile of growing eagerness. The girl put out her foot and ground the coal of the cigarette to extinction. Then she lifted her face to him for answer.

John Taylor laughed shortly.

"As far as I can see, that's not unreasonable," he said. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER VIII

"Who's the best authority on timber around here?"

John Taylor, hanging over the desk in the Commercial House, put that question to Henry Wales, the proprietor. Henry applied a match to his refractory pale cigar and coughed and spit.

"Humphrey Bryant," he said.

"Lumberman?"

"Nope. Editor of the *Banner*. State Senator since God knows when. But he knows logs."

"Reliable?"

"Well, yes. He aint very pop'lar in his home town; got a lot of fool ideas about holdin' back the country, but I guess his word's good."

John went to the post-office after his mail and put the same question to the owlish postmaster. The man craned his neck that he might look through the wicket across the street to the office of the *Blueberry Banner*.

"Go over to the *Banner* office," he rasped asthmatically.

"He's there at his desk. Hump Bryant. He knows all there is to know."

At the bank he was referred to the same man by the fussy little proprietor, and Jim Harris who met him on the street waved a hand toward the newspaper office and stated that Hump Bryant knew more about logs than Paul Bunion himself. Harris wanted to talk further but Taylor broke away; he had a feeling that the man was defiled and though he could detect no hardness behind

the good humor, the words of the dying woman last night echoed in his ears and made him uneasy so long as he was within sight of Harris.

The office of the *Blueberry Banner* was a dingy, dusty, dark little place, smelling as all newspaper offices have smelled from time beyond reckoning. An unpainted partition divided the front from the back office and it was plastered with newspaper clippings, many of them yellowed by age and dimmed by accumulated dust. The floor was of pine, the boards worn thin except where brown knots showed up like wens. A table in one corner was stacked high with a mixture of unopened mail, bundles of old papers and what not. Dusty files of the *Banner*, bound in calf-skin, reposed on shelves; a picture of Lincoln hung askew over them and on the opposite wall was a lithograph of Hazen S. Pingree.

At a cluttered desk sat an old man, a small, round, old man, who struck John at once as being the original for all the Santa Clauses that ever tooled a reindeer four-some. He was writing and as Taylor entered he looked up, put the thick lead of his pencil against the tip of his tongue and studied the new comer abstractedly with his bright blue eyes. The pencil went to the pad and laboriously scrawled a coarse line; then the blue eyes came back to John's face, twinkling brightly this time.

"Good morning, Mr. Taylor," he said.

John smiled. "News travels quickly."

"Yes. There's little fresh in a weekly newspaper up here except the advertising and plate matter. Have a chair; make yourself comfortable."

"I suppose you, like every one else, know why I am up here?"

A pink tongue roved the lips behind the whiskers and the bright eyes studied Taylor's face again. He took off his glasses, which had been shoved back on his forehead, and swung one stubby leg slowly.

"Have you seen your father's logs?"

"I've seen the logs. They happen to be mine though."

"Yours, eh? What are you going to do with them?"

"That's what I came here to ask you."

"Why to me?"

"Men in town tell me you know all there is to know about logging and I need expert advice."

The old editor wheezed a laugh.

"Meet any of my political enemies?"

"If I did, I didn't find it out."

"They're lax! Wait until fall an' election time and you'll hear what a scoundrel I am — hum-m-m — It's advice you're after, eh? Since you've come to me, then, I'll get personal right off. How much do these logs stand you in where they are?"

Taylor moved uneasily.

"My pride, sir — all of it." The foot stopped swinging.

"My father gave them to me for my start. He was quite sure that I would fall down. I'm inclined to think that he wants me to fall down."

The editor's eyes lost some of their brightness and something like concern showed there.

"That's too bad, son. It's a heavy investment and the job's a tough one. Do you know anything about logging yourself?"

"Nothing. Except that with logs thirteen miles from a railroad, with snow gone, the owner is up against it."

A pause.

"To cut 'em up for chemical wood wouldn't get out what you've put into them, would it? No — *anybody* could do that." He leaned back, locking his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. "There isn't any possibility of trucking them out by team or tractor without eating up their value. I don't know of a portable mill that's available, and with deliveries on machinery as they are, you couldn't depend on getting one for months —

"By George, Taylor, I don't know!"

A man smeared with ink appeared from the back office and the editor excused himself. He had no more than disappeared when the outer door opened and Sim Burns entered. He did not recognize Taylor until he had approached the desk; then he flushed and sniffed.

"Mornin'," he said, rather timidly. John nodded. Silence, while Burns shuffled — He cleared his throat. "I expect I owe you an apology, Mr. Taylor," he said with a servile whine in his voice.

"No, I don't think so."

This reassured the man, who said with more confidence: "All of us makes mistakes. I didn't know who you was or—"

Bryant reentered the room in time to interrupt Burns' attempt to ingratiate himself with the son of the rich Luke Taylor, whose identity he had learned soon after reaching Pancake the night before.

"Want to pay what I owe, Hump," he said, drawing out a purse. "It's two dollars."

"Just the price of a fifty-cent work shirt," said the editor with a chuckle. Sim did not respond. "Is this an election bet, Sim, or a promise?"

"I don't notice you're spreadin' yourself on congratulations."

"No, and your hearing is excellent," grimly.

"I knew what you was up to, Bryant! I knew you tried to get somebody to run ag'in me."

"Yup. They're all afraid of you up there, Sim. Your uncle was town boss so long he got 'em thinking it belongs to the Burns family."

"If we don't own it, we seem to be in charge."

"And more 's the pity, Sim!"

The man turned to the door.

"Much obliged for the two-dollar plaster." Slam! And a rattle of loose glass: the only reply.

The old man laughed to himself and sat down, but he did not turn to Taylor at once. He watched Burns cross the street. A limp curtain in an upper front room of the Commercial House moved back and Jim Harris' face appeared. His hand beckoned to the new supervisor. Sim went into the hotel and up the stairs.

From a drawer Bryant took a worn note book and opened it slowly. He glanced at the clock and on a fresh page wrote:

"May 6, 1920. 11.09 A.M. Sim Burns."

He riffled the pages slowly. Many of them were covered with just such notes: dates and time and names; nothing more. He dropped the book and folded his hands across his stomach and looked at John very soberly.

"Son, I'm up a tree and don't see a way down," he said.

The boy looked through the window again and the editor watched his profile carefully. For a moment they were so and then Taylor's expression changed as a shade of hope filtered through its seriousness. Helen Foraker was coming across the muddy street, the bright red of her jacket a vivid splotch of color in the drab little town.

"She," gesturing, "sent me here," John said.

Helen entered and the men rose, the old editor bowing with a mixture of courtliness and paternal affection.

"Sit down, Helen," he said gently. "Mr. Taylor says you sent him to me."

"Indirectly. I asked him to locate Pancake's best logger. I knew who it would be, but I didn't want to send him to you because I didn't want to risk suspicion."

"Suspicion?"

She nodded. "What have you told Mr. Taylor?"

She glanced at John and Bryant said:

"He brings a problem I can't solve. It isn't in the book."

"Give up?" The girl's eyes danced.

"Give up," said the other, bowing.

"And you?" Taylor merely shrugged for reply.

"Then my proposal won't have much competition!"

The editor's fat leg stopped swinging. "*Your* proposal? You mean you want to buy these logs?"

"No. I want to handle them, though, and maybe saw the lumber."

"*Saw* it!" The desk chair rocked forward with a wail of its old springs. "How in the world, Helen, are you going to get it to the mill? It's sixteen miles by road and that means —"

"That hauling is impossible, but there is the river!"

She looked at Taylor with that and he quickly retorted: "River? You can't float hardwood!"

It was one of the few facts of logging on which he was sure and he thought, for the moment, that his ignorance was being imposed upon, but she said:

"The ash, basswood and hemlock, except the butt-logs, will float. You remember the cedar poles I cut two years

ago?" turning to the editor, "and the water went down? We were short-handed and I left them banked. They're right at the mouth of this ravine. We can dog the maple and beech and birch to the hemlock and cedar and raft it to my mill. It will be very simple."

She looked again at Taylor.

"I'll make you that proposition: get the logs to my mill at the cost and twenty per cent and if you think I am going to trim you, you can hire somebody to watch. You can ship your logs by rail from the mill siding or I'll saw them; custom job — and you'd better let me saw them. There isn't any jack-works to get them from the pond to the track and your hardwood will begin dead-heading in a hurry, so it ought to come out of the water as fast as it gets to the mill. Cars are hard to get right now and you might have to handle twice."

She turned to Bryant who had watched closely.

"I'll leave it to you, Humphrey, if that isn't fair enough for a salvage job. If he shipped to a mill it'd be anyway a forty-mile rail haul and I don't know as he could get it done that close. Besides it'd add to the cost to handle them again at the pond. I don't think it's practical to get them out with a cross-haul or swing boom and tackle."

Taylor's heart filled with relief, covering the rising suspicion that perhaps these two were conspiring to gouge him on this proposal. For the first time since he had looked into that jack-pot and beheld the trick gift which his father had thrust upon him, he saw hope ahead.

Humphrey Bryant was rubbing a hand vigorously over his beard and the smile which made his eyes so bright ran out into a chuckle.

"My dear," he said to the girl. "There was at first something in you of the Blessed Damosel; then came a strain of Joan of Arc; this morning, I see the qualities of Catharine of Russia!"

John joined in the laugh and then checked himself. A moment before he had been desperate enough to consent to any sort of an arrangement, but now with the girl's proposal before him some instinct running in his blood from the blood of his canny father sounded a warning. Her statement seemed reasonable enough and simple. His logs could be transported and sawed but, he wondered, what would be left for him?

And he began rather falteringly to find that out. He asked foolish questions and was answered patiently; technical points were explained to him; the layout of the mill, which had been sawing only light pine logs into box wood, would have to be changed somewhat for the job; he learned of the bark market, of freight rates, of many factors which, an hour before, had been foreign to his interest. He learned, it is written here; he did not learn much; he was told, he understood, but the information slipped from one ear through the other, because this was all so amazingly new and remote from any interest he had ever held.

For two hours they discussed the job, and John went out to walk and talk with Ezam Grainger, the banker, and finally he went back to the office of the *Banner* to sign the formal agreement. With no little temerity, true, because it was like putting his name to a blank check. Still, there was in the manner of Humphrey Bryant that which induced confidence and trust, and as for the girl — he was beginning to find her quite complex and, though

he sensed the truth that she was a shrewd bargainer, he believed that those level brown eyes could conceal no crooked thought, that her fine voice would speak no untruth.

Helen and Bryant remained in the *Banner* office and John walked over to the Commercial House. The day seemed one of the brightest he had ever seen; the sense of inferiority that had been upon him earlier was gone, absorbed in a new sort of self-satisfaction.

Today's decision meant money; not a great deal, perhaps — but money; and honest money. Somehow, this qualification had never been of much more than casual importance but within the last twenty-four hours a change had taken place in him, as decided as a chemical reaction. He wanted money more now than he had ever wanted it before, but after last night's experience out in Thad Parker's house he was rather particular about how it should come to him!

He sat down in the dingy little office of the hotel and wrote at length to Marcia, telling her little of what had happened except that things were going well, exhausting his vocabulary in love making.

While he wrote, Helen talked gravely to Humphrey Bryant. He listened, as gravely, to the story of the visit that Sim Burns had paid her and when she finished he nodded.

"It begins to connect," he commented.

"With what?"

For a protracted interval he eyed her speculatively as a physician might look when debating the question of telling a patient the worst.

"To a movement that is on foot to build roads and more schools in the Harris Development district, that

more gullible men and women may lay their hopes on the altar of his greed!" He looked down at his desk. "This is Jenny Parker's obituary, Helen —" He paused. "Roads and schools cost money and this is a poor county. The Thad Parkers can't build highways; Chief Pontiac Power won't; but Jim Harris needs improvements to swell his profits. Jim Harris was behind Sim Burns in his election. There's only one property left, politically unprotected, that can foot big bills."

Some of the color went from her face

"And that is why they threaten to tax Foraker's Folly out of the country?"

"It looks that way. We can't fool ourselves on the direction of the wind."

He rose and paced the floor, rummaging in the pockets of his baggy trousers. Thrice he went the width of the office before the girl, hands lax in her lap, looked up. Then she said:

"I'm depending on you, so! You're the only friend I have who can stand behind me — or before me. My father could teach me forestry, but in the game of trickery — he was a child."

The old man rested a hand on her shoulder.

"At the next session of the legislature," he said, "we may be able to make some headway in protecting you from our asinine laws. And until then, I'll be with you from soup to — Omega!"

Outside, a man loitering on the walk, started suddenly across the street. A curtain in that upstairs front room of the hotel had moved slightly. The editor took the worn book from his desk drawer and wrote painstakingly:

"11.57 A.M. Wes. Hubbard."

CHAPTER IX

THAT was the sixth of April.

On the morning of the seventh Milt Goddard and Helen Foraker were covering the country by car and telephone for teams and men. The slide which dragged logs by endless chain from river to mill was overhauled, the blacksmith in Pancake was at work early making a quantity of chain dogs, and a wagonload of supplies went into White's abandoned camps, the nearest shelter to the ravine in which the logs had been abandoned.

That night, Black Joe dragged out his turkey and brought to light his aged Grand Rapids driving boots, unused but carefully preserved these many years. He greased them again and sharpened the corks, handling the foot gear with an odd excitement. The next morning he was on the stream early with dynamite, wire and his buzzer, and the heavy detonations of the explosive punctuated the day as he tore from their anchorage those snags which had impeded nothing but driftwood for a decade or more.

Three weeks later, for there were delays, the first raft, old Joe ankle-deep but top-side on the sluggish maple, dogged to cedar, swung to a stop against the boom at the mill and began crawling one by one, up to the waiting band-saw.

On a morning in mid-May, Luke Taylor sat in the library of his Detroit home, dictating to Philip Rowe.

He spoke a phrase or a sentence at a time and looked with his hard old eyes out through the broad windows, down the sweep of formal garden toward the river. His gaze did not go as far as the water, though; it was arrested half way, not on the Grecian terrace of marble, but on the trees that stood above it, bending their tops lightly in the breeze. They were white pines, planted there years ago despite the protests of the landscape architect who planned that garden; that group of trees was the only item that interested the man who had paid him his fee. It had been Luke's only demand: that White Pine — capitalized — be placed where he could see it from every south window in the mansion.

From the expression on the old man's face or from the tone of his voice, the occasion might have been of little importance. A look at his secretary, however, would have indicated that this moment was of great consequence — to some one; his hand, holding the pencil, trembled slightly in the waits, and the veins on his forehead, close up under the sleek hair, stood out in knots.

Luke went on:

"To my son, John Taylor — the sum of fifty dollars — weekly — so long as he may —"

A flush swept up over Rowe's forehead and a sharp gleam of triumph showed in his lowered eyes.

"And for the administrator —" Luke paused, working his mouth vigorously, and cast a glance at the head of the younger man, bowed over his book; his glance was crafty, and yet in it was something of good humor, something of favor, perhaps something of admiration — possibly, too, something that almost reached affection. He did not know that Rowe's heart stopped, that a chill

flashed down his limbs. This was the moment, the one he had plotted and planned — the moment when a new administrator would be named in a new will —

But before Luke could go on the door opened, a maid slipped in and dropped letters on the desk.

The intrusion distracted the old man, whose eyes rested on the mail. Rowe followed the girl's retreat from the room as though he could have harmed her for that break — and Luke was saying:

"What's in the mail, Rowe? Anything from —"

The other put his note book down and ran through the letters.

"From McLellan — Internal Revenue collector, Red Cross — Here's one from Pancake."

"From John?" The old man leaned forward sharply.

"He's written at last, eh? Read it!"

"You don't want to finish the matter of the will, then?"

"That can wait! Read what the cub says," with an impatient gesture. "First letter in all these weeks. What th' devil's he up to?"

Rowe's fingers were unsteady as they tore open the envelope and rattled the creases from the paper. He read aloud.

"Dear Father: It has been nearly a month since I left you to take up this job and I have not written for two reasons. First, I have been very busy learning necessary things; secondly, I've had nothing definite to tell you."

Rowe paused, and his face lost color.

"Go on," said Luke.

"Today, the first two cars of maple started rolling. They go to Bender of Detroit at \$76 for No. 2 Common

and better on track. The quality grades up to average — Hastily, John."

"P.S. I'm well, happy and busy. Love to mother."

Rowe's eyes went back over the paragraphs and his brows contracted a bit. Old Luke was very still a moment; then he said grimly:

"Read that again."

Rowe did, his voice not just steady.

"There's a trick somewhere. Call Bender!"

On the telephone Rowe got the head of the lumber firm.

"Mr. Bender, this is Rowe, Mr. Luke Taylor's secretary —"

"Bookkeeper! Bookkeeper!" mumbled Luke irritably.

"— and I'm inquiring about lumber from Blueberry County — You did — Yes, Mr. John Taylor — you. Thank you, sir —"

He turned to Luke. "They bought all right."

"At that price?"

"Yes, sir."

The old man wriggled as nearly erect as his back would permit and smote the floor a stout blow with his cane. "Sellin' the *lumber*, Rowe! Sellin' *lumber*! When McLellan had the best men he knows about on the job and they reported it was a dead loss! He's took logs that nobody'd touch and 's makin' 'em into lumber an' sellin' it green under my nose!"

His words gave way to a spasm of wheezy laughter and he waved his cane.

"I don't understand it," snapped Rowe.

"Understand! Understand it? Why, damn it, it's as plain as a mole on a pretty girl's chin! The young

buck's got something *in* him, Rowe. I thought he didn't. I tried to show him up — and by the Lord Harry, he's showin' me up! Showin' *us* up, Rowe."

He laughed again until he strangled for breath.

Rowe picked up his note book and sat down. "Do you want to go on?" he asked.

"With the will? The will, eh? —" Luke mumbled to himself and his blue eyes studied his secretary's face; then went out to that clump of pine. "No — no, Rowe. We won't go on with that, today. Telephone McLellan I've changed my mind about changin' my will — for a few days — a few days — He won't need to come out here this afternoon — Fifty dollars a week an' th' young buck fooled me! He laughed last, Rowe, he's laughed —

"Here, take a letter!"

The smile in his eyes was brighter.

"John Taylor, esquire, Pancake, Mich. Yours of recent date received and contents noted. Your mother is well. Yours truly.

"P.S. Bender is making his cracks that he beat you on your first shipment. Watch the market and don't be a bigger damn fool than you can help."

He grinned. Rowe looked up sullenly at this statement which had no foundation in fact.

"A line in time often gathers a lot of moss, Rowe," remarked Luke. "Now send his mother here — hurry!"

Curled on a chaise longue in her chintz-draped bedroom, Marcia Murray, too, read a letter from Pancake that forenoon, read with a mounting flush in her cheek and a light in her blue eyes that was not of good nature.

For a month, now, these letters had registered a cumula-

tive change in John Taylor. He had gone away a cynical, blase, conceited young man of the world; he was losing that cynicism and indifference; he was becoming as enthusiastic, as impulsive as a university sophomore, and as wrought up over his success as a normal twelve-year-old is over the capture of his first fish and game. And to Marcia Murray his rewards were about as significant.

In this letter he told of the sale of his first lumber and figured for her the approximate profit; he forecasted the grand total that his venture would yield, setting it off with underscoring and exclamation points, but as the girl read, her thin lips drew up in the suggestion of a curl. Where a month ago his letters had consisted of a dignified and assured love-making, they now chattered on about people who did not interest her at all; Humphrey Bryant, of whom John wrote as a firm friend; about a person named Black Joe — evidently not colored — who refused John his confidence; and about Helen Foraker, with a repression and an irregularity in the style which Marcia did not detect.

She finished this letter:

"I'm awfully sorry, but it won't be possible for me to spend much time at the house party at Dick Mason's lodge. You go, by all means, and I may be able to spend Sundays there. It's hard, Marcia, to give up that sort of thing, but I'm beginning to feel that my father wasn't so far wrong in thinking I didn't amount to much. The more I think of it the less I am inclined to ever ask a favor of him. This that I am making is all my own."

Her eyes lingered on that paragraph and her slender brows quirked; she glanced idly back over the letter,

stopping again on the page where he forecasted his possible profits. She folded the paper and placed it in the envelope and as she tossed it to the dressing table there was something savage in the gesture and she sniffed disdainfully.

In the hall a telephone jingled and she went to answer it.

"Hello — Oh, yes, Phil — No, not tonight, thank you — Oh, I've a headache — By the way, Phil, has Mr. Taylor heard from John? He has? No — Yes — after all, you might take me out a while this evening — about nine? Good-bye."

Looking at the reflection of her cool blue eyes as her cool small hands worked in her golden hair, Marcia spoke again:

"Of course, if he *should* please his — But, damn it all! He doesn't *want* the old crab's money!"

CHAPTER X

ON Helen Foraker's suggestion, John had gone to live in the men's shanty with Milt Goddard, Black Joe and the balance of the crew that had not been shifted to the White camp.

"This is your job," she said. "I am only working for you. I'll be more comfortable if you see what is going on both on the river and at the mill, and you can't see if you stay in town."

It was not a congenial shelter for him. He was out of place, did not belong to the class of men with whom he ate and slept and his reputation as a "mixer" in that other existence he had lived did him no good here. More, Goddard was surly and gruff, as his deeply rooted jealousy prompted. Black Joe ignored John and would respond to none of his advances. When Taylor asked questions Joe would look about and grunt scornfully and say to some one:

"Did you hear that? He," brandishing his pipe stem toward John, "wants to know if —" repeating the question. Then he would answer explosively: "*Of course* it is!" Or: "*Hell, no!*" giving by tone and manner the inference that none but an addle-pate would have put such a query.

After their agreement was signed, Taylor had nothing of a personal nature in common with Helen Foraker. Their conversations were all brief and wholly concerned with the work and much of her talk was as Greek to

Taylor. He watched the girl closely, with a growing humility, which, strangely, he did not resent. He saw her those first days, among the men in the ravine where teams snaked the logs from their jumble to the river's edge, where they were caught in a boom and dogged into rafts. She was sparing of words, untiring, always alert, and she knew what was going on. He heard her challenge the method of a teamster whose horses were stuck when the log they skidded jammed between two great stumps.

"Back now, and swing in gee," she said sharply. "Don't yell at them! You've got your team up in the air. Try it again — Haw, now!"

The log was obstinate, the teamster flushing as others looked on to see her directions sting his pride.

"If you don't like my way, why don't you try it yourself?" he asked.

She dropped from the log on which she stood, took the reins from him, tried and failed; let the team rest, rubbed their noses, eased the collars, and started them again — They strained together, skin wrinkling over their broad rumps, they grunted, swung, and the log started forward.

"Now you take them," she said, returning the lines. "You'll go farther with a low voice."

She had been right. The man grinned himself because he had been wrong and shown up fairly.

Taylor saw her rebuke a youth for carelessly driving in the dog-wedge.

"That won't hold," she said, kicking the wedge with her boot toe. "If that raft goes to pieces and that one log dead-heads, we're losing as much as we're paying you for a day's work. Knock it out and put it in right!"

The boy did. In the vernacular of the men, she got

away with it; and because she knew and was sure she knew.

He saw a farmer who had come to work for a few days standing close behind a team as the driver prepared to skid out a log.

"That's dangerous," Helen called out.

The man grumbled that he had been in the woods before, but did not move.

The horses started forward and hung and strained — and one tooth of the heavy tongs slipped from its hold and the implement shot forward, spinning over, struck the man's thigh and bit savagely into the flesh before the horses, lurching forward at the sudden relief of strain, could be stopped. The tongs fell away but the polished steel was smeared with blood and the man's pants leg darkened quickly with it.

Helen was the first to his side, borrowing a knife, slitting his clothing, exposing the two ugly holes in the flesh, one of which spurted an alarming stream where an artery had been torn. She took the man's suspenders, bound them about his leg above the injury and twisted the tourniquet tight with a stick — She was gone most of the day, remaining in camp with the man until the doctor from Pancake had come to dress the injury, and then going herself to tell his family of the accident.

(They recounted this of her while she waited for the doctor: " 'Swear', she says. 'Swear if it hurts too much. I've heard worse oaths than you can invent!' ")

Another item: He heard men on the job scoffing at the idea of timber as a crop; in Pancake he saw men grin and mutter to one another as Helen passed, and knew that the girl was aware that she was being laughed at

derisively. Her manner on such occasions was striking; the soldiers of his company would have given her the blanket characterization of the army and said that she was hard-boiled; his mother would have said that she carried a chip on her shoulder; Taylor himself thought her defiance splendid. She could not divorce herself from her forest; when men belittled it and the idea behind it, it was as though they had made uncouth fun of her. To be a friend of the girl required that sympathy for her undertaking be made evident; to be outside her favor it was necessary only to show no charity for the work her father started. Nothing else seemed to influence her to any extent.

Such things he saw, and others: Saw her jump lightly from log to log as she went over the face of that tangle, poised like a splendid animal, lithe and alive and as sure of her body as she was of her mind. He watched her cross the river, leaving behind a rank of logs which rose sluggishly from the immersion her weight gave them, but she reached the boom of high-riding cedars without wetting her stout boots. And he saw her in a canoe, driving the light craft upstream, arms and shoulders and torso working with a rhythm which set his heart in faster measure.

He had been at the mill one morning and was walking through the forest to the skidway. At the house Black Joe came from the woods and scarcely grunted in return to John's salutation. But after Taylor had passed, he heard the man hail him.

Turning about, he saw Aunt May standing in the kitchen door. They were within ear-shot of the woman, but Joe said, "Say, tell her Miss Helen won't be down for

dinner. She wants to know if Hump Bryant's telephoned."

Taylor repressed a smile at this strange procedure which he had witnessed on several occasions, and repeated the information and the question.

"Tell him," said Aunt May, "that there ain't been a 'phone call all forenoon."

Gravely Taylor passed along the message and then, as the woman turned into the house and Joe went on, he resumed his way.

A childish shout from below checked him on the high bank and he looked down to see Bobby and Bessy in the baby trap. That was what all Foraker's Folly called the small, dry sand bar, separated from the bank by a dozen feet of shallow water and reached by a small foot bridge made of stakes driven firmly in and planks laid along them. Each fair morning Aunt May shooed her charges across the bridge and then drew the planks to shore, thereby isolating the children on their sand bar and leaving her wholly free for the housework.

"*There!*" she would say each time she disposed of them. "*Now* I know where you younguns are at!"

The peril of water was deeply planted in their hearts and they never attempted the easy wade to shore.

However, playing in the clean sand grew monotonous and though the children never openly protested, they were full of excuses to delay their isolation, full of enthusiasm when released and ever on the watch for some passer who might be waylaid and induced to talk. Bobby, seeing Taylor, had halted him without excuse, but when John stopped the youngster pointed toward shore and cried:

"Look! Looky!"

"At what?"

"There! Somepin —"

"A kic-kic," said Bessy.

Bobby grinned. "She means a cricket. That's what it is. I fought it was somepin worse."

Taylor smiled, seeing the ruse, commented casually and started on.

"Did you see Black Joe?" Bobby was standing on the shore side of the bar now, toes almost in the water, and Bessy was beside him, finger in her mouth, wide-eyed in expectancy at this game she knew so well.

"Yes, I saw Joe. Why?"

"Oh — we seen — *saw* him too."

Bessy waved a hand at the river behind her.

"We see wog go by-by," she trebled.

Her brother smiled and straightened her sunbonnet. "She says, we watch the logs go by," he interpreted.

"Wotta wog — wotta big wog."

"That means lots of big logs. She don't talk very plain."

Pause. Bobby broke it hastily, for pauses were dangerous.

"Did you see Aunt May? Was she all right?"

Taylor laughed heartily and said that Aunt May appeared in good health and squatted on the brink. This change, forecasting a visit, made Bobby grin.

"Aunt May says you need a — a — a — now, you know what Grandpa Humpy Bryant is?"

"An editor?"

"Nope. What he is for Bessy an' me."

"He's your guardian, isn't —"

Taylor had interrupted himself but Bobby took no notice of his queer smile.

"That's what!" he cried. "Garden! Aunt May says you need one."

"Oh, so Aunt May thinks I need a guardian?"

"Uh-huh. She says so."

"What do you think, Bobby?"

Thus confronted with a question, the nature of which was beyond him, the boy was embarrassed.

"I don't fink," he said and laughed. Then, losing his self-consciousness: "I'm like what Aunt May says Aunt Helen is: I don't say somepin unless I fink somepin. An' when she finks she says. That's what Aunt May says. She only finks about somepin 'portant, Aunt May says."

"And then, likely, I'm not very important, Bobby?"

Again the child was beyond his depth and twisted his fingers.

"Milt, he finks about you. He says to Aunt Helen you're a damn dude —"

"Oh-h-h-h!" broke in Bessy, looking up at her brother, who flushed quickly. He crossed his heart solemnly, bending over her, grasping and shaking one of her arms. "Honest, Bessy, brother won't say it again. Honest, cross my heart!"

Taylor sat down on the bank, dangling his legs in the yellow sand.

"So Milt says I'm a dude, does he?"

Bobby nodded eagerly. Here was something he could follow; and this was becoming a deliciously long interruption to the morning's captivity.

"He says that to Aunt Helen two-free days ago. He says you a — a —," glancing cautiously at Bessy —

"a dude, an' you don't know what's goin' on wif your logs an' you let a woman make money for you — That's what Milt says."

"Waf-wog! waf-wog!" shrilled Bessie as a raft rounded the far bend.

The children discarded Taylor, who had served his purpose with them for that day. He rose and went on, and they did not even turn to wave farewell.

"So I need a guardian — and I'm a damned dude — and I don't know what is going on with my logs — and I'm letting a woman make money for me —"

He looked up through the pines and laughed ruefully.

"I'll be damned if I don't have to plead guilty on two counts!" he said. "And — I'm not sure of the others."

Later he added:

"And she always says what she thinks, and she doesn't say anything about me. Therefore," making the mathematical symbol of deduction in the air with a forefinger, "she doesn't think about me at all."

It was that evening. Helen Foraker was at her desk and looked up with surprise as Taylor entered, for it was the first time he had been in her house since their business agreement.

"Did you ever stop to think," he began without preface, "that I don't know much about what's going on?"

"I have it right here; the daily reports from the mill," she said.

"Not that," smiling. "Those are your figures and I'd like to be able to know whether they're right or not. Not because I doubt you, but because this is my job."

I'm so ignorant that I don't know anything about my own business!"

She sat back in her chair.

"I've been wondering if you'd wake up," she said quietly.

"Wondering! I didn't suppose you took time to think about me."

She traced a line on the blotter before her with a dry pen.

"I've had lots of time to think about you, John Taylor. A lot of time to wonder about you — and not enough time to make up my mind. I've never known many kinds of people; I've never known any one like you. I thought I sized you up the first time I saw you and I haven't had much evidence to change my opinion. Women are supposed to have a certain keen intuition; perhaps we have; perhaps that has kept me wondering if you wouldn't wake up.

"Sit down."

He took a chair and she folded her arms, looking squarely at him.

"Most people I have known don't wonder about themselves and so they don't understand themselves. That morning when we went to look at your logs you told me more about yourself than any — stranger ever has. What you said backed up my first impression, but because you said it made me suspect that something had given you a jolt. Ever since, I've been wondering if you'd be content to hang around the edges and let circumstances make a boomerang of your father's trick."

She stopped, and Taylor smiled gravely.

"Circumstances?" he asked. "You mean you've

wondered if I'd be content to ride into my father's good opinion on your shoulders!"

She protested, but he rose abruptly from his chair.

"Yes, it is you!" he cried suddenly excited. "What prospect I have of making a little success here is because that drunken boy gave me the wrong turn at Seven Mile and sent me here to spend the first night under your roof! And it's you who have made me want to wake up. You took me with you to Thad Parker's that night and I looked death in the face and caught a glimpse of life," voice low and growing tense. "The next day you talked to me about waste and duty and Americanism in the terms of saw-logs and made it more convincing than any flag-waving I've ever listened to. I've watched you dominate men who won't even accept me as a companion. I've watched you do things that to you are everyday accomplishments which are away beyond me —

"Just being here has gotten under my skin! I didn't realize it until today, but I've been uncomfortable and out of place and I haven't known why. Now I do know. I'm thrown against a girl who is doing things for herself and for me. You're making money for me, you're winning my father's favor for me, and I don't like it!"

He paused, breathing rapidly, and saw a look in the girl's eyes that had never been there before when she looked at him, a vague shadow of admiration, and his heart leaped.

"My mind should be good for a little something — Lord knows it's had preparation and rest enough! I have a stout back and strong hands," spreading his big, white palms. "I want to do things for myself, I want to make my own money, to win my father's good opinion, but I

don't know how to use the tools I have to work with."

He stopped abruptly and let his hands fall limply to his sides. Then he asked very simply:

"Will you teach me?"

In such a manner, the John Taylor who had come to the Blueberry to humor his father, that he might win wealth without soiling his great hands and who had first learned that there is some money from which fair-minded men recoil, reached the understanding that the reward is only one factor in achievement; in such a manner the John Taylor, who had been self-assured and self-satisfied and superficial, humbled himself, yet in that deference was nothing servile, but rather it had the nobility of simplicity and frankness; in such a manner, the man who had set out to find material things which would make one woman happy, came to another woman to find that peace which can come only with respect of self.

Helen's hands dropped to her chair arms and a happy flush spread over her cheeks, brightening her large eyes.

"I will teach you all I can, John Taylor!" she said.

Like an ambitious boy on his first job he sat that night while she sketched for him the rudiments of what he must learn before he could know what was being done for him. There was talk of Schribner rule and Doyle rule; allowance for defect, mill over-run; of costs and markets; of lumber grades and transportation, of felling and bucking and swamping; of circular and band-saws and kerf, of those fundamentals which he had hoped to skip in any business; talk of the grubbing he had loathed, and this night he did not shy from it, but questioned and listened and remembered.

It was late when he rose. Helen followed him to the

door and stood on the threshold looking out into the spring night. Frogs sang and the jovial chorus of crickets played above the murmurings of the river and the light breeze whispering in the pines. A screech owl uttered its tremulous call not far off and a whip-poor-will cried in the swamp. Taylor looked up at the girl. Her arm resting against the casing was very delicate in line but, silhouetted against the light, it seemed then like a part of some competent, dexterous machine; her face was mostly in shadow, but where the lamp glow fell on one cheek was an impression of softness, of gentleness, strong in its call to his senses. She was talking, but he was unconscious of her words; just heedful of the musical timbre of her voice.

His breath caught and a strange creep went over his skin. For the first time she was for him a woman, a female; she had been an antagonist, an example, and now she was a girl, wholly different from any he had ever known, capable, far-sighted, keen of mind — and most lovely! He walked slowly toward the men's shanty. Pauguk muttered savagely from her kennel as she caught his scent. Manifestations of the appeal which had emanated from Helen went as quickly as they had come, but they left him unsteadied; that moment had taken something away — he did not know what.

He entered the bunk building where a light still burned. Goddard was mending a horse collar and looked up and his gray eyes lighted unpleasantly, but he did not speak. Taylor brought out pen and paper and sat at the table beneath the hanging oil lamp to write to Marcia Murray. For a long interval he was there; a dozen times he started forward and touched the page with his pen, but no mark was made.

He did not *want* to write to Marcia Murray! He could not share with her this new enthusiasm for the job that he was to do with his own mind, his own back, his own hands! For this night she had no part in his life; for the first time in months he went through those last moments before turning in without remembering the sound of her words, the feel of her breath on his cheek, the touch of her cool fingers, the steady look in her clear eyes. Something had come into his heart which left no place for little Marcia. Marcia, the girl for whom he had braved his father's vitriolic scorn, for whom he had come on this distasteful errand!

The others had gone to their blankets; he rose, blew out the lamp and went to the door. A light was extinguished in Helen Foraker's room. He saw an indistinct figure appear at the window and draw back the curtains and linger a moment and disappear — and again that delicious creep went over his body.

From an indefinite distance, a slow, accelerating throb beat upon the air, stout and measured and progressing to its gentle rumble: the drumming of a cock partridge. Again it came — and again, as the bird, fevered with the great impulse in him, made the darkness pulse with his love making. Very quietly, as though awed by some soul-moulding experience, Taylor turned back to his bunk; the stimulus did not leave him; he tossed restlessly, eyes open, sleeping in brief snatches until dawn; he rose in the new day, to a new manner of living, of thinking, to work with Helen Foraker's men and his logs, to talk markets with Humphrey Bryant, to sit evenings with the girl and talk timber and labor and board-feet and now and then be unable to hear even his own words

because of the blood that the beauty of her face sent crowding into his ears.

And so it was that he could write to his father that evening and tell him briefly that he had turned the stone to bread, and that his letters to Marcia Murray from thenceforth were not impelled by the urge which made the grouse beat his wings through the night, but were concerned with men and the deeds of commerce!

CHAPTER XI

LIVING as he did within the boundaries of Foraker's Folly, John Taylor's perspective was too close to yield a comprehensive picture of the whole. He had heard the forest spoken of derisively in Pancake, had heard men of the crew who worked in it and about the mill talk disparagingly of the property. But these comments had been standardized, the voicing of ideas of long standing, and had contained no detail. It was a foregone conclusion in the community that the project was the venture of a visionary and destined to fail. Most men found satisfaction in this belief. For long ago they, or older men they respected, had forecasted such a calamity.

Taylor knew that some of the pine was cut each winter but that the trees taken out were not harvested for their own value but for the good that their removal would do those which were left; cripples, the unthrifty or the light gluttons only, were taken. Banks of these still flanked the mill which, before it commenced to saw the hardwood, was busied making these logs into thin box lumber and lath. Pulp-wood bolts had been shipped, he knew, and cars of small slabs and edging for fuel. Of what was cut, there was no waste.

He knew of the nursery behind the big house where seeds were taken from cones and planted and the seedlings removed to long furrows where they progressed a year before being transplanted to those places where trees were not thick enough on the ground. Black Joe had

charge of the nursery and John had watched him at his work evenings and in those days when he was not needed elsewhere, had heard the old fellow muttering to the baby pines as he fussed over them with pride and tenderness.

As the days grew fair and less rain fell he learned of the fear of fire. Beside Helen's house Watch Pine reared itself, a great old tree, five feet through at the butt, rising straight and true for seventy feet before it flung its tattered banners to the air, a dignified veteran, standing above and guarding over that younger generation of its kind. Beneath the branches a crow's nest had been built, and up the trunk was a stout ladder. On dry days some one was on watch there through the hours of daylight, scanning the forest and adjacent country with a glass for the smoke which would herald danger.

But these were high points of information, unrelated, largely meaningless.

It was a few days after his first cars of lumber had rolled out of the siding at Seven Mile that John came upon Sim Burns in the woods. The new supervisor was walking along a fire line, note book in hand, pacing carefully and counting trees, and did not see Taylor until they were close together.

"Hello, Mr. Taylor," he said in his harsh voice, and sniffed. "How are th' logs turnin' out?"

"Well enough," John said.

"Makin' up th' tax rolls," Burns volunteered. "Just lookin' over this piece.

"My goodness, but this property has been let off easy! Taxes on this'll come in handy for roads an' a new court house."

"I suppose taxes on this stuff do run high."

"High! My goodness, she ain't paid *anything* like she should have paid. You see, our county's been run by old men. They never come in here to make their valuation. They told Foraker when he started he couldn't grow timber as a crop; they've stuck to that idea. No progress, Mr. Taylor, no progress. This piece has always been taxed just like waste land. Assessed for four dollars an acre last year an' look at it," with a wave of his long, dirty hand. "I'll bet this piece right here'll go twenty thousand to the acre right today!"

"No!"

"Sure! Ask anybody. An' four dollars an acre! My goodness, it's worth twenty-five dollars a thousand stumpage to any man. You ought to be interested, Mr. Taylor, now that you are one of our tax payers."

Indeed John was interested, but not because he owned forty acres of cut-over land in Blueberry County. He left Burns abruptly and went on, staring incredulously into the pine. Twenty thousand to the acre, and twenty-five dollars a thousand stumpage!

There were ten thousand acres of pine here, he knew. Ten thousand times —

He gave a whistle of amazement. The figures mounted dizzily. He stopped dead still in his tracks. What a property!

And Helen was in a corner. He recalled the threat of taxation that Burns had made that first night, remembered Milt Goddard's prediction of failure the next morning; remembered, also, the girl's words, as she told her foreman that the pinch was coming, that the hardest time was at hand for Foraker's Folly.

Why not? he asked himself. She had helped him — this was a property to stir the most sluggish of imaginations. His imagination, his ambition was mounting. His paltry few logs would be sawed within three weeks — and then, what?

He thought back to Old Luke, of how he revered the Michigan forests which he had subdued; surely he had made his father see that he was not afraid to work, not above grubbing; as surely, he felt, his father would now stand ready to back him — would be as willing to help him as he had been ready to impose upon his helplessness with a cruel practical joke.

He walked on slowly, thinking, multiplying and losing his breath again before the ascending totals — “It will help her, when she needs help,” he told himself. “I don’t know what she needs, just — but — And if I could help her there’d be no obligation; and with no obligation I wouldn’t feel small — and then, perhaps —”

He stopped his thinking aloud as a flush came into his cheeks. In his eyes was a light of ambition which had nothing to do with trees and logs and dollars and once more that creep went over his body as it had when he first heard the partridge drumming for his mate —

That evening John wrote a second letter to his father, longer, containing references to detail that he knew were intelligent references. The last paragraph read:

“By the way, how much backing would you give me if I could come to you with a chance to get behind several thousand acres of Michigan white pine that will go, say, twenty thousand to the acre?”

He sent that letter to Pancake by Goddard who took it with a surly nod; then John lighted his pipe and walked

the river's bank to dream and see rising before him a future of incredible glory —

Little did he reckon the fires of avarice that would be lighted by what he had written, the thwarted impulses which would be touched to life again! Little did he dream of the misery that would follow in its wake, of the heart-sickness, the desperation, the regret. He could not see himself friendless, caught in a net of chicanery and ruthless plotting, with the joy of this night wiped out by the unhappiness that was to come!

CHAPTER XII

It was Sunday, on a clear, still, June morning. The men's shanty was deserted, the mill silent, the teams at White's camp stamping lazily in the stable.

The world was a glory of vivid life. All about growth had replaced the dormant grayness which had prevailed when John Taylor arrived in the country. Out on the plains June grass blades of heavy green had hidden the tufts of last season's dead stalks; brakes thrust their tender, curled fronds through the moss, and sweet-fern and sedge, those useless growths of the barrens, were, for the fortnight, things of beauty. Aspens and birch were in tremulous leaf, oak and maple had burst from their maroon buds and flaunted polished foliage to the sun. Within the forest the pines were stirring, terminal buds had opened and new, light needles were stretching for air and light. A company of birds made the somber shadows joyous and the Blueberry, wandering through the forest, sped crystal clear over golden sand or dark depths, reflecting the graceful ranks of spruce and balsam which edged it, taking on a border of luscious green where reeds shot through the surface.

Over on the Au Sable, forty miles away, Marcia Murray and a dozen or more of Taylor's Detroit friends were gathered at Dick Mason's Windigo Lodge for one of the protracted house parties which had given the place a name. John had half promised Marcia that he would be

there for the first Sunday, but somehow his interest in her was steadily waning. He was unconscious of change until some necessity for decision brought it home to him, as on that first night when he had no interest in a letter to her, as on other nights which followed when he could write only of himself and his job, and on those rare occasions when he could not even bring out his writing materials. He had believed that he was as eager to see her as he ever had been, but while he planned the trip across country he had half consciously sought an excuse which would keep him in the forest, and when a man who wanted his hemlock bark telephoned that he would come to the mill at Seven Mile soon, John interpreted that "soon" to suit his own strongest desires. He would wait over Sunday for the buyer, and all the time he secretly hoped the man would not show up, that he would have the day to himself — and that he might see something of Helen Foraker when her eyes were not on the men who worked for her and her mind not on the forest or his logs —

In such a subtle manner the change crept through him. He told himself that he was as fond of Marcia as ever, told himself that, but a voice deep in his heart soberly, steadily denied — and when on this Sabbath morning of gold and blue and green he thought of the Marcia he was not to see that day, slender, small, cool Marcia Murray, she seemed to him peculiarly unsatisfactory and inconsequential.

This was the first time he had not reacted to her without at least a superficial thrill and the realization was something of a shock. He had come to the Blueberry to find easy money; he had chosen to discard the easy way and help produce his own wealth. He had gone that far from

the reasonable creature he had been and he had gone as far, perhaps farther, in his very impulses!

On the river bank near the house Helen sat with Bobby and Bessy Kildare. Pauguk, freed from her kennel, was chained to a stump, nose between her paws, orange eyes on the face of her mistress as Helen talked to the children.

John approached slowly. The wolf dog turned and muttered under her breath, throwing a venomous glance at him, but Helen was occupied with Bobby and did not notice.

"Look!" she cried suddenly, indicating a flitting bird. "What is it?"

The boy looked sharply.

"Fly-catcher," he said. "Olive-sided fly-catcher!" very positive in tone, but his eyes searched hers with query.

"Are you sure? Listen!"

The bird had lighted in a tree and his thin, plaintive *see-a-wee* floated out over the river.

Bobby laughed. "Nope! Wood peewee," he said and showed confusion for his cocksureness of the moment before.

"And what does the olive fly-catcher say?"

"This," puckering his small lips and whistling a *hip-pee-wee*. "Like the pipin' plover," he added and laughed in delight at her smiling nod of favor.

"There's another bird! See him, Bobby?"

"He's easy! He's a flicker. An' there's a whiskey jack! See him lookin' for scraps?"

He pointed excitedly to the jay near the kitchen door.

"I seen a pine finch today, too. I knowed him because he had yellow only on his wings an' tail."

"You *what?* And you *known!*"

"I *saw* him, and I *knew* him," Bobby answered slowly, much abashed.

There was perspiration on his lip and the hair about his temples was damp; the vigorous color of his cheeks was stained by the flush which followed her correction, and he swallowed with his small soft throat in such a way that she leaned forward and dragged him close to her, stroking his head, laughing to cover the tenderness in her eyes.

Aunty May appeared in the doorway and called the children. Bessy started at once, waddling on her shapeless little legs, but the boy lingered and said:

"I try to learn the things you teach me, Aunt Helen. If I learn as much as you do, will you marry me when I grow up?"

"Oh, Bobby, if you're as nice a man as you are a little boy, if you try to learn always, if you are as kind then as you are now, you'd make any girl happy."

"But you!" slapping her knee insistently and looking into her face with a frown which told that he would not be put off. "Not *any* girl! You!"

"I'll be an old woman, then. But if I should ever have a little girl I don't know any boy I'd like to have her love except you."

Bobby eyed her with sober skepticism a moment and started away complaining:

"But you won't ever *promise!*"

Taylor had approached, overheard and watched, struck by the quality that was in the girl's face and voice and manner as she talked with the child; a tenderness was there, a strength of maternal feeling that he had

never seen reflected in the face of any girl before; perhaps it had been in others and escaped his notice, but, as he stood there watching Bobby go and listening to Helen's casual comment on the glory of the day, he was thinking this: That the face of Marcia Murray would never yield itself to a look like that.

He sat down beside her and drew lightly on his pipe. Against the far bank a trout was feeding, breaking the velvet surface of the pool by his frisky rises.

"So I'm not the only one who learns things from you," he said watching for the fish. She laughed disparagingly and said something about having little to teach. "Oh, no! Don't say that," he interrupted. "You have everything to teach children and — men. Do all boys who learn things from you want to marry you — when they've learned enough?"

She mistook his gravity for a form of banter and laughed in protest.

"Don't laugh," he said, and then leaning forward impulsively: "Maybe I'm not so different from other boys who learn things from you — and want to learn more so they —"

A flush rushed into her cheeks, the first he had seen there, the first time he had seen her unpoised; it startled him, and her brown eyes, very wide, fast on his, startled him also and for a moment they sat there, staring at one another while words surged upward to the man's lips —

And then a house wren, perched in a pine, tail at its pert angle, began his breathless spring song; the notes poured from his throat, fast and faster, liquid and mellow and infinitely lovely, and he twitched his tail and darted his small head and moved his feet on the branch as though

the thing he had to say could not be stayed, as though he must cram those precious seconds with his love-making —

Helen looked away and Taylor put the pipe stem between his teeth, relaxing, confused by what he had said, confused as well by the love song of the bird who had put into music the words that frothed to his lips and which he did not have the courage to speak — nor the right to speak, he suddenly remembered, and stirred uncomfortably.

Embarrassment held them mute until Pauguk, who had watched John ceaselessly, moved against her chain and muttered a threat.

"The men tell me you raised her from a pup," he said, because he felt that he must say something and this was all he could think to say.

Helen stretched her hand toward the dog.

"She must have been a month old when I took her. A collie of ours went wild and disappeared and was gone a year; men kept telling my father that they had seen her with the last wolf that was left in this country. Father didn't believe it until we found her in one of Black Joe's traps. The puppy was by her; they'd been traveling evidently.

"Joe killed the dog — she was very dangerous then — and brought the pup in to show us. They were all for killing her, but somehow the little thing, backed in a corner, ready to fight with its milk teeth, seemed so pathetic and helpless and courageous that I couldn't let them — Too, I thought it would be quite a triumph to make her my friend. It was; and a very hard job."

"You like to do the difficult things."

"Perhaps. That is vanity. Nothing that is easy seems worth while."

He watched the trout rising and smoked thoughtfully. "Is that why you buried yourself here in this forest? Because it is hard?"

"I haven't buried myself. I belong to it. I'm a part of it."

"And you've never wanted anything else?"

"I've never had the time."

"It satisfied all your impulses?"

"No. Not all. What aren't satisfied will have to wait — a while."

Pause. Helen's mind was not wholly on what she had been saying; the flush still lingered in her cheeks and she did not look at Taylor. The pause grew to a moment of silence and then, as though to overcome the confusion that he had put upon her, or as if fearful that he would commence again where the wren had ended, she began:

"My father used to say that want was entirely a matter of environment. This has been my environment, so I've never wanted anything very strongly that couldn't be had here. I was born here. I grew up along with the trees, though most of them had a big start on me. I never knew my mother. I never knew many people except my father, and those few men who came here because they were interested in — my environment. I think my father would rather I'd been a boy. He never said that; he was very kind. But he trained me as he would have trained a boy.

"I ramble," she said laughing and more at ease.

"No — please tell me about him. I've been here weeks and I know nothing about this forest he started.

I think your father must have been a remarkable man."

"He was — in many ways. When I knew him, though, his life revolved around one thing: this forest. Reforestation was a religion with him, land economics his theology. He infected everybody who came near him with that religion — that is, all who were intelligent enough to understand. I was down with the disease before I could wholly comprehend. I played with baby trees instead of dolls; I planted tiny forests of my own instead of keeping playhouse; I learned to fight fire before I learned to sew. I put in the years learning log scales that most girls spend learning scales on a piano. When I could read I read books on silviculture instead of stories; I knew more about chemistry than I did about clothes; more about soil than I did about boys.

"You see, we were a sort of joke in this community and had to be quite self-sufficient. After I was more than a little girl we stayed here always because we were too poor to get out. The first years took all my father's money; then came debt, and he was very conscientious. We never went anywhere to meet people; they came here: teachers of forestry, foresters from Europe.

"And then when my father died I didn't have time to feel the shock or to be lonely because responsibility all came on me, so the other things I might want to do have had to wait."

"A big burden!"

She shook her head. "Not a burden, unless the urge to paint a great picture or write a great book is a burden. It's something bigger than you are; one is helpless before an ideal."

"But now that you've put it over —"

"Put it over? Oh, no!" shaking her head slowly. "No, not yet."

"You have grown a forest."

"That's only a part. It is all Foraker's Folly for most people and the end is to make all people understand that — Foolish Foraker was not foolish."

"I see," he said vaguely.

"Are you sure that you do?" Pause. "I'm not. You're too young," flushing slightly again, "in experience, I mean. You're only weeks old in this; some men are life old in the same experience and they won't see."

"It's not this tract, not these few thousand acres my father wanted men to see. It's something else: he wanted to show what all this land might be that they call waste land, that they look on as a burden and an eye-sore. Those plains down the river are useless now; they are a burden and horrible to look at. It's not the fault of the land; it's the fault of men."

She sat up and her manner became a bit more vehement.

"Did you see Louvain?"

"No. But I got to Rheims."

"Do you see any parallel? No — of course you don't. You don't see the heel of the Hun on these pine barrens. You don't visualize the devastator, the leveler of all that was beautiful and useful. Oh, we were Prussians, we Americans! We were ruthless, heedless. All we saw was forests and a market for their products, so we butchered. We only saw the hour, only thought about personal gain. It wasn't the conscious Prussian, the deliberate destroyer; it was the Hun in our hearts, the spirit of the age: thoughtless youth, my father used to say. Our pine went out to build the country where cheap lumber for

cities was needed. They stripped the forests so a country might grow, just as the Prussian needed to grow and would grow quickly at the cost of his own future, even."

Taylor watched her closely and she saw the bewilderment in his face.

"Your father cut millions of feet of this pine; he bought it and paid for it and his energy made it into homes. But it was his fortune that was made, too, and it was his men who left these barrens behind; and their children are living in a country spotted with great acres of waste land, and his grandchildren will face a timber famine. Do you know that in Michigan there are millions of acres which are considered useless for all time? And not only in Michigan, but in all the Lake States; in New England, in the South, in the West.

"There's over a quarter billion acres of land that once grew forest which now lie idle between the two oceans. A lot of it can never be farmed or grazed, but in that lies our national future. Logs, lumber, forest products are the foundation of national life! Ties for railroads, and charcoal to make the iron that goes into equipment; timbers for the mines that yield coal for the locomotives and metals for every use. The shoes you wear were probably tanned with oak bark. Your necktie is silk, probably artificial silk, made from spruce pulp. The cloth in your coat was woven in wooden looms with a dog-wood shuttle; the pencil in your pocket is made from Tennessee juniper, likely, and the note book behind it came from northern spruce and balsam."

She watched a swamp sparrow perch for a moment on the telephone wire near her house.

"Take the telephone: Again, your mine timbers to

get the copper, the converter poles in the smelter where the ore was reduced, the poles under the wires, the paper around the wires in the underground cables of your own city, the wooden desk for the instrument, the turpentine in its varnish and even the rubber mouthpiece you talk into and the rubber receiver came from the trees!

"Civilization can't make a move without using forest products and our forests are going and we are doing nothing with our billions of acres of idle land that once grew forests. This land that is waste is waste in the worst sense. It won't grow food crops, won't fatten cattle or sheep, but it will grow timber!" She waved her hand downstream toward the miles of desolation that stretched between them and Pancake.

"And while we are turning our backs on it, our supply of wood is shutting down. National forests? They're remote; much of their area is inaccessible. They give us only three per cent of the timber we use now. The men that own virgin forest are butchering and have a leg to stand on because there are other men like Sim Burns using taxation as a goad. We've torn down and we have not rebuilt. We can build, and that was my father's idea; to show that we can create as fast as we destroy.

"Less than fifty years ago this land was stripped of its pine; today it is maturing another crop. The same could have been done with any other piece that grew good trees: Just keep the fire out and nature would have done much in time. Fire, fire, fire, without end! Every summer it eats across the plains country; every summer it does its damage on cutover lands in all the timber States. It not only destroys trees, but it takes

the seed bearers and the seeds that lie ready to sprout and the life of the soil itself.

"To exist as a nation, we must have forests; to have forests all we need to do for a beginning is to give this worthless land a chance. We can speed up its work by helping — by keeping out fire, by planting trees by good forest practice. Can't you see all these Michigan plains growing pine again? And in Wisconsin and Minnesota, Pennsylvania and New England, the South, and everywhere where hills and valleys have become blackened eyesores? Don't you see what it would mean to people, not only in cheaper homes and steel and railroads, but something else? Fish and game and a chance to play as men were intended to play! It is so simple to do; to show people that it is simple is such a task!"

She stopped with a smile and Taylor rapped the ash from his pipe.

"That's a head-full," he said soberly.

Helen drew a deep breath.

"I'm glad I don't bore you," she said. "There are few people who will listen, few who realize their dependence on forests."

"But they must listen to you, now. You've succeeded."

"I have only commenced. You can grow the trees and that will satisfy the people who love trees. Sentiment doesn't get far; it's necessary to show profit. Is reforestation an economic possibility? men will ask. That is the question to answer."

"But you have! Look at what you have produced!"

Again she shook her head.

"There are trees, yes, but think what it has cost to grow them."

"Cost? Of course it cost, but you began with such a little capital. Your land must have been so cheap."

She shrugged.

"My father was impractical. His first costs were away higher than necessary. Compounding interest will double the investment in your land every ten years, remember; some years it has cost nearly fifty cents an acre to keep the fires out, and there are ten thousand acres of pine here. We have almost a hundred miles of fire lines that cost a lot of money, and those are only the big items. There's replanting and a hundred other things.

"For twenty years there was no income except from the scattering Norway pine which wasn't good enough to take when the first loggers went through here. After twenty years the young trees were beginning to crowd and slowing down growth, but thinning cost money and there was no return from it then. Meanwhile debts piled up and interest went marching on.

"The value of stumpage went marching on, too, which saved us. It is high now; lumber is higher than it will be six months from now, but it won't drop back to where it was before the war to stay. Never again, because the forests aren't here. The cut of Southern pine has passed its peak — did ten years ago; it will dwindle and then all that America has left will be the forests of the Pacific Northwest.

"Enough there to last forever? No. They said that of New England; they said that of Pennsylvania and New York; they said it of the Lake States. Your father must have said it: that there was enough pine in Michigan to last forever. All those men believed that except my father and when they'd cut thirty years there was no

Lake State pine; so they went south, where they thought there was enough to last forever — and those forests will go out with our generation.

"In the woods when a saw gang has cut into a tree until it commences to sag and snap they stand back and cry 'Timber!' It is the warning cry of the woods; it means that trees are coming down, that men within range should stand clear. My father used to say that the cry of 'Timber!' was ringing in the country's ears, that the loggers had given the warning, that the last of our trees were commencing to fall — but we haven't heard! Our ears are shut to the cry, our backs are turned and unless we look sharp we'll be caught! "

She paused a moment and lifted a hand and let it fall.

"We're caught now," she said. "It's too late to grow enough in time to avoid the hurt. There will be a shortage; there is now over great regions, and it will be worse before you and I have lived a normal lifetime, in spite of all that men can do. A few years more of doing nothing and the pinch will hurt, *hurt*, John Taylor! Roosevelt said it again and again, ten years ago; other men have said it; government departments have said it officially. Think of Michigan, a great timber-growing state with millions of acres that will never grow anything else, paying millions of dollars every year in freight bills on lumber! And your father probably said that there was enough pine here to last the country forever! We can make good a grain shortage in less than a year; we can overcome a meat shortage in three or four seasons, but you can't hurry timber. It needs fifty to a hundred years to reproduce itself and nothing that men know about can hurry it — and men are doing nothing adequate now, this year, this spring, this morning!"

Taylor had a flashing memory of old Luke, staring at a white moon through the plume of a yellow pine, a counterfeit pine, longing for Michigan forests again, hopeless and cynical. And he looked at this girl, sitting up cross-legged now, gazing at the river, cheeks glowing, eyes far away, and he remembered that Humphrey Bryant had said of her — that in her heart was something of Joan of Arc, of Catharine of Russia, and something of the Blessed Damosel —

She looked back at him and went on.

“That has helped my forest — the available supply pinching down. We’ve gotten along somehow with box lumber and lath and pulp wood from our thinnings, but the pinch is coming and we are not ready to cut now. We could cut, we could make money, but it would prove only half the argument. My father’s whole object was to get his capital turning its full interest return each year and then to take that interest while maintaining the capital — not eating it up, not making the forest a temporary property. It’s in the waiting period now, just as a fruit grower is with a young orchard. Our thinnings and their income are like the first few apples or cherries, just enough to stall off some of the interest accumulations. The fruit grower realizes on the increasing bearing area of the trees; we realize on the quality growth of these pines and the climbing lumber values.

“Foraker’s Folly is at the turning point. The value of the standing timber is commencing to overtake the interest which has been compounding away all these years, but neither the timber nor the investment is quite ripe. To cut now would be to over-cut the rate of growth, but in a few years, a very few years, we can harvest a

part of what is here and that part will about equal the growth on the rest of the tract; it will take care of all the investment, cover all these years of compounding interest, and show that the forest is a sound, going, money-making venture, that it can go on forever, that there will always be something to cut, that there will always be white pine here, that there never will be useless red-oak brush and gnarled poplar, blackened snags, lifeless soil, and Thad Parkers and Jim HARRISES!

"That is what my father started to prove and they called him Foolish Foraker — and I loved my father, I believe in him — and I want men to believe in him as I do!"

She stopped, breathing rapidly. Taylor was thrilled, stirred by her enthusiasm, by the glow of a crusader which was in her eyes and for a moment he looked into her face with a feeling of reverence — and then he saw her as a girl again, laughed at, whispered about by foul-mouthed yokels, fighting stupidity and small-minded men!

"A terrible load for you!" he muttered. "Why — Why doesn't the State do this? Isn't it the State's job?"

She smiled tolerantly.

"My father used to say that in the history of civilization every just function of the State has followed individual enterprise. The State is thick-headed. It is the individual who lightens burdens, the individual who blazes the way that States may follow — and as for Lansing!" she laughed sadly. "Waste land has meant only a page of tabulated figures to most men there!"

"My father used to say that we had an over-supply of office holders and a shortage of leaders. Michigan has done a lot, comparatively; we have state forests that are

almost models in some ways, we handle our fires better than lots of other states, but, much as we've done, we haven't scratched the possibilities or made more than a feeble step in meeting a necessary problem.

"Of course, it's a job for the state. Everything, location, soil, climate, circumstances, favored this forest or it never would have had a chance of proving out. It was the one place in ten thousand where one person had even a chance of success. Individuals can't do the job for the country. It will take the state — the big state — the federal government, not twenty or thirty little governments fussing inadequately with a problem that involves all of us.

"And it needs men who can think and will think; who are men of action and not afraid of action. Not a crowd whose virtues are mostly negative!"

"And how much longer," he asked, "will you have to carry on?"

She shook her head rather wearily. "That depends on markets, on demand. Three, four — maybe a half dozen years."

"But what about — Sim Burns?"

A shadow fell across her features.

"I don't know. Humphrey Bryant is the rock on which I've stood in trouble. He has worked for years to change the timber tax laws so that ventures like this will not be driven to the wall. He has worked — he is still working. Without him there would be no chance —

"Oh, for the present, anyhow, I'm at their mercy!" She said that rather desperately and rose abruptly as though the fact excited her. "But we'll try to keep on, we'll try to keep going —"

She took Pauguk back to her kennel and Taylor started away through the forest. Until dark he walked and came out at the mill, ate with Raymer, the mill foreman, smoked and started back through the night and the forest.

The gash of the fire line let down the light from an avenue of stars to give the road beneath his feet a grayness in the flat black which was all about. No individual trees were discernible; here and there against the sky could be seen the motionless reach of tufted limb but on either side the pine was an unbroken wall, silent, motionless — And yet as he went through it that forest seemed to have the powers of speech and motion, for Helen Foraker had breathed life into it that day for him. It was no more fleshless, no more without consciousness for him than would have been a company of silent, unmoving men ranked under the stars. It was dynamic, powerful, capable of great manifestations, waiting — waiting — waiting for the word to stir —

It was an eerie feeling which enveloped him there, alone in the gloom and the silence. He felt like an intruder, like an unwelcome stranger — and small, mean, low-spirited. He, the seeker after possessions, after honest possessions, won by his own skill and effort, felt mean, because that day he had realized that he had not even sensed the example that had been all about him for weeks, had dragged it down to the level of his feeble appreciation, thought and spoken of it in his own inadequate terms.

Foraker's Folly tonight represented something that had never entered his ken: an idea beyond material gain, no matter how heroically won. Not once in her talk had Helen spoken of what it meant to her in wealth, in profit.

It was an adventure in practical creation for the sake of building, designed for the benefit of no individual, developed for those who were not yet born and for their children of all time. He had been aware of men and women who had struggled unselfishly that others might find living easier, but those people had always worked among men, had stood in range of the public eye, had been of cities, of great, spectacular movements. But here, lost in this country which had been laid waste, a girl, backed only by an aged politician and a group of laborers, carried on her fight, ridiculed, unattended, that homes might be built and cities might grow, that a forest might yield and renew itself for all time!

Taylor felt as small as he had felt before Helen when he first entered her house, a searcher for an easy road to fortune. He had come far; he had done the thing which astonished even his exacting father, but tonight that was as nothing. Sight had been given him and his emulation was roused, not by possible personal triumph but by the thought that perhaps it lay in his power to help carry on this forest, the forest which had become emblematic of all that is most worthy. It was fundamental, it stood next to the supply of food, it was a bulwark against privation and the insurance of national life itself.

He stopped at a juncture of fire lines and looked at the stars. The dipper hung above him and the northern lights, shooting their green spires far toward the zenith, moved behind the treetops, setting the staunch banners of pine in bold silhouette.

"I wanted to help because it meant profit for me," he said in a thin voice. "Profit for me — and to open the way for more profit — But, no longer — not now!"

He watched the spires of restless light creep up and upward, sweeping in from right and left, seeming to come from east and west as well as from beneath the north star until they converged above his head, forming a cone, tremulous and fading swiftly.

He clasped one hand with the other and worked at its fingers slowly.

"And Marcia?" He shook his head and one knee gave suddenly. "I can't keep my promise — unless you find happiness — with me —" He started on slowly but his pace grew rapid and within a half mile of the men's shanty he burst out:

"God, Marcia — I don't want to make *you* happy — any more!"

CHAPTER XIII

WINDIGO LODGE is a huge, rambling building of logs, high on a bluff overlooking the south branch of the Au Sable. Great chimneys of boulders flank the structure, a wide verandah runs about three sides, screened in and furnished in wicker, with those refinements which are not native to the plains country: luxurious swinging seats, lounges, winged rockers, tea wagons and flower baskets.

Inside is a great main hall. A fireplace fills one end, bright rugs are on the floor, a piano with its floor lamp is in one corner; there are shelves of books and wide window-seats; electric lights are about the walls and glow from beneath lampshades on tables, and from the center of the beamed ceiling hangs the massive root of a cedar tree, polished expertly and each of the two-score root prongs holds its small frosted light bulb.

A girl in riding breeches played the piano and three couples danced with abandon to the primitive measure. At the far end of the room a table of bridge occupied four others. Mrs. Mason, Dick's mother, read in a corner, unmindful of sounds or movement. Only one of the gay party was alone: Marcia Murray sat in a rocker on the verandah, tapping the concrete floor nervously with a small pump, staring with sullen eyes toward the river, where a firefly winked through the spruces.

It had been a difficult day for her, the culmination of weeks which had been beset with increasing perplexities. Soon after her return to Detroit from Florida she had dropped an occasional word to be carried by curious minds to meet other words that John Taylor had dropped,

and it was not long before her best girl friends came to her with those hopeful kisses and smiles which are designed to provoke confidence.

But Marcia had made no actual response to their advances, because those perplexing factors had commenced to present themselves to her in John's letters before the gossips had gotten very far into her affairs, but she let it be known that there might be something to say — before very long. She knew that they were watching her at this house party as they had never had the opportunity of watching her before; they listened to her every word, remembered her every action, for the snaring of the heir to the Taylor millions was a matter of no small importance. To heighten this curiosity John had not appeared, though he was only forty miles away. At heart Marcia was worried and petulant and suspicious from the first day of her arrival, but she sparred alertly before the others, letting them know little, for her pride was as great — as some of her other qualities.

But her hope that he would spend this first Sunday with her had been too high for hiding. She had let them become aware that she expected him and when he did not come she knew that they detected her dismay, try as she did to cover it. After dinner she went to her room, begging a headache, and was aware that lifted eyebrows and a smirk or so and perhaps a cautious I-thought-as-much followed her. She opened a bag, took out John's letters and read them slowly, carefully, weighing words, reading again and again his references to the Foraker pine and to the girl who owned it. He was very enthusiastic over the forest — but of Helen he said little — much too little.

Marcia's cheeks became flushed and that cool calculation which was characteristic of her eyes gave way to temper. She was not nice to behold as she sat on the floor, reading those letters — after that she lay down, stretching her slim legs and throwing her arms wide, staring at the ceiling, thinking, thinking. She slept a few moments and moaned once or twice lightly. When she awakened, she opened her door and listened; it was quiet below; most of the others were gone. She went down and sat at a desk and wrote a lengthy letter, a bright, light charming letter, completed with much pains and deliberation and some rewriting.

The letter was for Philip Rowe.

She kept her front of gaiety very well thereafter until darkness when the others found agreeable diversion, but she did not care for cards or dancing and reading was out of the question, so she slipped outside and sat alone, watching the night, brooding, planning, with temper in her eyes again.

It was there Fan Huston found her. Fan was thirty, married at twenty-two, childless, given to tightly drawn hair nets, much rice powder, stiff gowns and personal difficulties. She went in for trouble as some women go in for surgery and some men for the collecting of stamps or obsolete firearms. She came to the door, saw Marcia, looked cautiously about to see that her husband was occupied with a girl in a yellow sweater and came swiftly across the verandah, drawing a chair to Marcia's.

The girl looked up with a casual word, but the turn of her head exposed her worried face to the revealing shaft of light. Fan said nothing for a moment, but took Marcia's hand in hers and squeezed it significantly. The

music stopped, voices arose; then the piano thumped again and Fan Huston sighed as in relief and leaned forward.

"I understand, Marcia dear," she said lowly. The girl bit her lip and turned her face away and made as if to withdraw her hand, but Fan leaned nearer. "Now don't think I'm butting in! I understand, and there isn't a bit of use thinking that you can keep me from helping you! It's a shame, and I'm here to say so! If John Taylor had come over today I was prepared to take the first chance and give him a generous piece of my mind — and make him like it."

Her brittle voice vibrated indignation and that quality met a need in Marcia's heart. Taylor's growing indifference had given her the feel of a jilted woman; she had been helplessly furious at the serene interest these other women took in her misfortune. But she had not yet reached the point of storming against the shabby treatment John had given her, and that is the specific which brings relief to the feminine heart when everything else has failed.

"You know that you can trust me, dear," Fan was saying. "You've been very sweet through it all, but you couldn't keep it from Fanny! I know; I've been through it and I've helped others through it and I can't help telling you that you're going too far, taking too much from John! It's a downright shame that he should treat a girl like you this way, but you're a little goose to put up with it! You have the right of every woman to protect her pride, and if you don't exercise that right, he may — *walk* on you, dear!"

Marcia's hand, which had lain rather tentatively in

Fan's, moved and its fingers twined with the older woman's. Fan lowered her voice and went on. Later they walked together, arm in arm, up and down the terrace before the house and Marcia cried a bit and steadied and grew indignant.

Before they went in they stood looking at the play of northern lights.

"You would do that?" Marcia asked in the pause.

"Positively I would! I wouldn't let a day go by. If there should be another girl —"

"Oh, there isn't! I'm sure he isn't interested in Miss Foraker!" There were limits to which Marcia could go even in that sympathetic company and her pride prompted that lie. "It's — it's just that he's so wrapped up in his business."

"Well, in either case," Fan was not quite convinced, it seemed, "the best way to bring him to time is to go there, have it out."

Marcia watched the bank of light on the horizon throw out a fresh fringe of pale green.

"Miss Foraker has asked me to come," she lied again.

"I might — Yes, I think you're right. I could drive over — tomorrow —"

Fan patted her hands.

"*That's* the girl! Don't be *too* abrupt with him, but just have everything clearly understood. Of course, I know your feeling for John, but I can't help remarking, as Dr. Mason remarked to Dick yesterday when the big trout went through his tackle, 'there are several big ones left in the stream yet'—

"And if I were you, Marcia dear, I'd wear that blue sport suit —"

CHAPTER XIV

MILT GODDARD returned from Pancake that night, bringing letters for Taylor.

Sitting on the deacon's bench in the men's shanty John opened them. One was from his father. The address was typewritten, but within was a scant page of Luke's scrawl. It had been years since the old man had touched pen to paper for his son and that fact was thrilling!

"You are crazy to talk of that much pine. It can't be done. Don't believe everything they tell you up there just because you're a gullible cub. I'm sending Rowe to Pancake Monday night just to see how big a fool you are. Your mother is well. Yours, etc. L. Taylor."

John breathed deeply and smiled and scratched his head and re-read the crabbed sentences. Beneath their crustiness was genuine interest, a willingness, after Luke's manner, to take him seriously at last, an indication that the favors he had asked two months before and which had drawn only a cruel trick now were his.

Yesterday he would have tried to calculate the profit that might accrue to him from Luke Taylor's aid; tonight he saw only in that note a promise that the burden on Helen Foraker's shoulders would be lightened. She had helped him, she had shaped him — she had taught him; and now, perhaps, he could repay some of that obligation.

He could not know what waited just over the horizon of time!

The other letter was in a smudged, scrawled envelope,

addressed in pencil and posted from Pancake. He opened it absently. The message had been written on rough tablet paper. It read:

"John Taylor Sir Well are you going to settel or will i have to seu you My damages is not Grate but unless i am paid 1000\$ I will law you out of the county Yrs respy. Chas Stump esq."

He frowned over this. Goddard came in and he showed it to him. Milt laughed in the superior manner he had adopted toward Taylor, but condescended to say:

"Miss Foraker has a stack of 'em a foot high. Everybody who comes here from outside or anybody who has any property here gets those from Charley. He'll be around to see you."

Taylor had not been at the mill an hour the next morning when Charley Stump appeared, pushing his safety, that guilty look in his watery eyes.

"Hello, Mr. Taylor," he said, halting at a distance.

"Hello, Charley."

"Fine weather, ain't it?"

"Right."

John was copying from a tally sheet and paid no more attention to the old man until he had finished. Then he turned and looked squarely at him. Charley's hand caressed the bent handle-bar and his old eyes shifted uneasily.

"Your logs is turnin' out good, Mr. Taylor?"

"Fairly well."

"That's fine. You like it here, Mr. Taylor?"

"You bet, Charley!"

"Well — that's good," falteringly, as though he had started to say something else.

"Was there something you wanted to say to me, Charley?"

"Oh, no; I just dropped by to see your logs. I'd been over sooner only I ain't got my tires yet," pointing at the rope-bound rims.

John walked away smiling. Charley was so meek and casual after his preemptory threat.

It was mid-afternoon when Helen, driving her Ford home from Pancake, saw a pea-green roadster attempt to swing into the road from one of the lesser trails which came in from the north. The car was driven by a girl and both car and driver were out of place there. The motor bellowed, the sand flew from the rear wheels, spinning tires ate through the sod hub-deep into the earth and stopped. Helen swung her car out of the road, ran around a stump, over a half-rotted log and stopped in the road again beyond the big car.

Marcia Murray was out, looking petulantly at the plight of her car when Helen came up.

"They call these roads!" she exclaimed. "All day long I've been wandering over these plains and trying to get right directions. How you people manage to get about is more than I understand."

Helen stooped to see better the position of the rear wheels.

"We drive light cars," she said simply. "And we get used to these roads." She looked at Marcia, immaculate, blonde, flushed, with fury in her eyes. "Where were you going?"

"To Pancake. How far is it from here?"

"About eleven miles."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

Marcia sniffed. "You're the first person I've met today who wasn't sure, so perhaps you are right."

Her haughty manner did not impress this girl in the khaki skirt and laced boots, Marcia perceived. She experienced misgiving as though this other disapproved of her and as though that disapproval mattered. She was not accustomed to being made uncomfortable by the opinions of strangers. The flush in her face mounted as she watched Helen, who had dropped to her knees to look under the stalled car.

"You're in deep, but I think I can get you out."

"You can get help?"

"I could, but it isn't necessary. Let me take a pull on your car."

"With that?" looking disdainfully at the rattle-trap roadster.

"Yes."

Helen went to her and came back with a shovel. She did not look at Marcia and said nothing and this further nettled the girl. She stood back, however, smoothing the skirt over her hips, and watched Helen shovel sand and turf from about the rear wheels. She did the work quickly and without any evident effort or awkwardness.

"There" — drawing off her gloves and shaking sand from them. "Now we'll try."

A rope was forthcoming from the box on her car. She backed in close and made it fast.

"Start your motor," she said. "I think the two of us can manage it."

The engine sputtered, the gear of the Ford whined, the slack came out of the rope, the big car bellowed, both sets of driving wheels tore at the earth and the heavy

car crawled forward, following the smaller between stumps and around through the brakes until it was again in the road.

"You're not headed for Pancake now," Helen said when the motors stopped. "It's the other way, but you can turn around if you're careful not to cut through the sod."

"You'll let me pay for this, of course."

Marcia produced her purse, but Helen would not accept money, though Marcia was insistent.

"Well, it was very kind of you, anyhow. You'll take my thanks, won't you?"

"Perhaps the person I am looking for is not just in Pancake; that is his address, but there's a mill somewhere near here?"

"Yes, on a little further."

"I'm looking for a Mr. Taylor. Do you know of him?"

Helen eyed Marcia with a new interest. "I'm working for Mr. Taylor and I am going to talk with him as soon as I get home. He will be at my house."

"Oh" — rather slowly. "How much further is that?"

"Not far. If you want to you can follow me —"

"That's very kind of you," icily.

Marcia was appraising this woman, now, as her identity seeped into understanding, and the personal inadequacy she had felt gave way to its sister emotion: resentment. It was with this girl John was working, it was to her he had referred with such significant repression in his letters. Marcia's flush came back as she followed the rattling Ford over the swells and into Foraker's Folly.

At the door of her own house Helen stopped and got down.

"I have some things to look after," she said. "Mr. Taylor is in there, or will be shortly. Won't you go in?"

Marcia's thanks was curt. She ran up the steps, breath quickening, and paused with her hand on the knob and watched Helen join Black Joe and move toward the nursery. Then she opened the door and stood looking in.

John was at Helen's desk, loose papers about him, lumber quotations clipped from a Detroit newspaper propped against a book, figuring on a pad of blank paper. He had heard the approach of Helen's noisy car; he had not heard the soft breathing of the big roadster, so when the door opened he believed it was Helen returning and did not look up at once, but only grunted an abstracted greeting. When no step sounded he raised his eyes.

For a moment he sat in motionless amazement, and then his pencil dropped to the blotter.

"Marcia!" he cried, and there was in the word a ring of gladness which was eloquent, as he beheld the trim girl, cool and clean and representative of all that had been desirable — a few short weeks before. "Marcia!" Amazement was there as he rose slowly, bewildered at seeing her there. He stopped about the corner of the desk, moved toward her and stopped. "Marcia?" A faltering question, reflecting all the doubt, a crystallizing of all the change that had come into his heart, a troubled echo of the truth that had come to him last night as he stood alone under the pines.

For a moment they were so, a dozen feet apart, the man's face a study in conflicts, the girl's intent, alert as it pried and probed with the incisiveness of her kind.

"John," she said lowly. "John?"

He moved forward and she put out both hands to him,

her eyes questioning, before the calculation which flickered in their depths; he took her hands and halted. Just that: took her hands in his and stopped.

They stood, and he felt her tremble.

"John — aren't you going to — kiss me?" Her voice was exquisite pathos mingled with fright and misgiving, fright and misgiving which were well balanced; almost too well balanced.

He released one of her hands and his fell to his side limply.

"No, Marcia," shaking his head slowly. "I'm not — today."

She drew back then, a hand at her throat.

"John? John! You aren't glad to see me?" in a breathless whisper; and then, voice mounting, "John! What is it?"

He turned away, thrusting his hands into his pockets, staring gloomily through a window.

"A mistake," he muttered.

"Mistake?"

"Yes, a ghastly, miserable mistake!" he cried, facing her again, throwing his hands wide. "I'm at fault, Marcia. The blame in it rests on me. I've been selfish, indecisive. I've changed and said nothing to you about change. If you hadn't come here today I might have come to you with this — or I might have let matters drift — I don't know."

He swallowed drily and looked down at her. She seemed smaller than ever, seemed more lovely, more fragile than she ever had before; her blue eyes were wide with fright and her lips parted in bewilderment, and that bewilderment was genuine. His brows drew together with the pain of hurting her, but the change of weeks had

come to this rushing conclusion and there could be no evasion, no more delay.

"I was honest enough with you in the beginning," he went on. "I'll ask that for myself: credit for being sincere. I was off my head about you, I was ready to promise anything to you, ready to do anything for you — and I was wrong."

His voice dropped and he let his hand which had been lifted drop, too.

"Wrong?" she asked. "Just where — ? Just how? —" Her voice was a bit steadier, that amazement was going from her face; a glint of craft was there.

"In everything — from you to saw-logs!"

Her eyes narrowed, just perceptibly.

"And what have I done?" she asked, "What — to make this difference?" She was steeled, as though her question invited accusation.

He shook his head. "That's the devil of it: you've done nothing." She stirred, as in relief. "It's all on me, Marcia." He did not see the leap of triumph in her eyes or the settling of her mouth. "I — made love to you and promised many things — which I can't fulfill."

The girl stepped forward quickly.

"John, there's some terrible misunderstanding here," she said hurriedly, resting a hand on his arm. "You frighten me, but I know it's a misunderstanding!" She pressed a hand against her lips as though to crowd back a sob but her cool, clear eyes showed no such distress.

"You're miserable; you're making a mountain of — nothing. There has been some good reason for your — for what might seem to other people like your neglect of me, I know."

She waited a moment and when he did not look at her, shook his arm gently.

"Everything has been going so splendidly for you, dear! Your father can't keep his pride to himself. He tells everybody about you. He's ready to help you — the world is before you, John —

"Promises?" She laughed nervously. "The only promise you made me was happiness and that happiness is yours to give me — for the asking."

She paused, smiled wistfully, and Taylor looked down at her again.

"No, Marcia, I can't give you the happiness you want," he said evenly. A flicker of hostility showed in her eyes. "There's such a difference in the happiness that you wanted and the happiness — you see, I'm not the John Taylor I was when I left you," very earnestly. "I've changed in the things I want and respect and because of that I've changed in almost every thought and impulse. I couldn't help this change if I wanted to; I'm not trying to crawl out of a mighty uncomfortable position; I'm telling you facts.

"The John Taylor who came up here started to make a fortune for you, to give you happiness in the terms of possessions that you could see and touch. That isn't possible any more. I can't do that — even after I've promised to do it — I didn't come to Windigo yesterday because I knew that some such thing as this would have to be said, though I didn't admit it even to myself until last night — and I didn't want to hurt you — I've tried to hide from the fact that the next time we saw each other — I'd have to ask you to — cancel our contract —"

"I don't understand," she said coolly and drew back.

"I scarcely understand myself, Marcia. I don't want to make money. I would like to have money, but I've lost all interest in starting out to make a fortune as a first objective —"

"No one wants money; they want what it will buy."

"Not even that," shaking his head. "I — I'd like to do a little something for a lot of people. I'd like to be of a little service, I think. I'd like to put my mind and body and what little money I may be able to get from my father behind an idea which is going to count for many people — not just for me. I'd like to put in the best years of my life — just doing that."

"Go on; you're becoming interesting," with a tinge of irony.

"You see, I have my chance to do that in this forest, this pine. I've written you about it. You won't understand if I try to tell you all, but I'll say just this: it's an adventure in putting back into the hands of men the forests that men took away. I told you about Thad Parker's wife — you've seen this country. My father helped make the Jim HARRISES and the Thad PARKERS possible; he helped lay waste to this country and did nothing to put back what he had taken.

"I used to believe that my father's fortune was something for me to use. I never considered the fact that the devastation which made that fortune worked a hardship on any one else. I've come to understand that now, and I've come to think that maybe the job before me is to undo some of the damage my father did; to put back some of the things he took away. He wouldn't understand that, of course. It would make him furious. No matter; he won't have to know, but I'm going to ask him

to help me do just that job. I won't put it in such terms, but I won't deceive him. I can't promise him any great profit; I can't even promise him his money back; I don't know, yet, how much I will need, but I want him to take a chance with me and I think he will. He is sending Phil Rowe to Pancake to look it up and he'll be here tonight —"

"And what has this to do with me?" There was defiance in the movement of Marcia's head and John looked at her rather startled by her evident wrath.

"Only this — that I can't offer you anything of what you want."

"And what else?" she waited. "That I'm — no longer satisfactory?"

"Please don't put it that way," he begged. His voice trembled and his face was drawn with suffering, because he hurt her. "We wouldn't have anything in common, Marcia; I couldn't give you what you wanted — and with you unhappy, where would I find happiness? It would be wretched for both of us. Don't you see that?"

"Yes, I see," she said and laughed again. She drew off her gloves nervously, with anger showing in the sharp little jerks of her hands. "You've changed, yes! And because you've changed, you assume the right to make me ridiculous in the eyes of my friends, to humiliate me, to delude and deceive me and make me suffer."

"Oh, Marcia —"

"You're not dumb, John Taylor! This isn't any sudden change in you; there's nothing spontaneous about it; it's deliberate and planned and I am — the deluded virgin!"

He tried to interrupt, but she stormed on, voice unsteady. "That is what it amounts to! You made love to me

furiously; you were extravagant in your promises. I believed and promised to be your wife—you have it in your power to make good these promises, but you have forgotten that I and others may think that you owe something to me regardless of—this change in you! Wait a minute! I'm not through!" Taylor dropped his hands limply and listened. "All my closest friends, all your best friends, those who know the most about us, those who had our confidence, knew that I had given my word to marry you. They talk about you and gush over the way you have developed, when all they want to know is why you've changed in your attitude toward me—the cats! They held up all their plans yesterday to see if you would come, and when you didn't they tried to say that they were sorry, when I knew that they felt that it served me right for trusting you at all.

"There's another thing: How it affects me, here," a hand on her breast. "I put my trust in you; you made a solemn compact and now, on a whim, you ditch me—because you don't want to make money! Because you want to become a sort of evangelist, you begin by trampling a girl's heart and making her a laughing stock. Have you no pride, John Taylor? Have you no shame?"

Her questions stung like the bite of a leash. He could not know what went on in her cool little mind, could not know the meanness of her own heart at that moment. For him, who believed he had known women, Marcia had been worthy of his trust; for him she had been sweet and gentle, honest and without guile. He could not know of the nights she had been with Phil Rowe, playing him, holding him at once aloof and her prisoner; he could not guess the tensility and intelligence with which she had

followed the varying favor of old Luke. He could not know the secret plans she had made in heartlessness and mercenary calculation, the deceptions she had practiced, could not know the scorn she had for the first manhood and idealism that ventured into his letters. But this he could see and know — that instead of hurting this girl he had stirred a terrible temper; that instead of crying out to him in suffering she talked to him of her position, of what he could do for her if he would! Pride? Shame? Had he neither?

"I have pride, Marcia; I have shame. I have too much pride to lie to myself, to go through with this bargain which was to have meant much happiness. Now — I could never bring you happiness. It is better to see failure ahead than to walk blindly into it. By foresight — there is perhaps chance of another start. Shame? Yes, I have shame! The only greater shame that could come to me would come if I dodged this thing today — and went through with something infamous." He moved forward, not just steadily, and towered over her, looking into her face with a scrutiny which would not be evaded. One of his hands worked slowly as though he clutched for some saving condition. For a breathless moment they stood silent, giving one another stare for stare.

"I have changed and you have changed, Marcia. I — I never thought you had claws! I was prepared to break your heart today — and pay the penalty to my own conscience, all because of my mistake. I paid that penalty here in this room only a moment ago. I suffered as I never thought a man could suffer, because I was acting the cad, because I thought I was — hurting you. There's one thing I want to ask you, and I want you to be as

honest with me as I have been with you. If I had come to Windigo yesterday, if I had told you that I could never bring fortune, if I had asked you to keep your promise under those circumstances, would you have taken me?"

She did not answer. She tried to tear her eyes away from his, tried to move, but she was helpless in the grip of his earnestness. A door opened and Helen Foraker stepped into the room, saw them and halted in surprise.

"Please excuse me," she begged. "I heard no one and thought you had gone out."

She started to withdraw, but Marcia checked her.

"Don't go," she said and laughed. She began drawing on a glove, covering the white, well shaped, well tended hands. "There isn't place for two of us here, it seems. I'm going — to make room for you, Miss Foraker."

She drew back and her eyes ran the length of Taylor's body, resting on his face with a blaze of fury. Her lip curled over her even teeth as she said: "This, I suppose, may be the ending of the first lesson!"

She turned toward the door.

"Wait!" he said sharply, and caught her wrist, swinging her about to face him.

"You haven't answered me — under those conditions, what would you have said?"

As she shook off his clasp she smiled again and her chin went up. "What would I have said?" She laughed, with the laugh of a victor. "Why, you poor fool, I'd have laughed in your face!"

The screen door banged behind her. As she jumped to the seat of the roadster he stood looking after her, arms limp at his side, breath quick. The motor started, the car backed and swung and with a bellow as of con-

temptuous rage it struck into the road which led out of the forest.

John turned slowly toward the doorway in which Helen had appeared. She was gone, the door closed. He stared blankly at it.

"Fooled!" he muttered. "So — *I* was the dupe! It wasn't the man — but what he could give!" He put a hand over his eyes and laughed weakly. "And I humbled myself — I crawled on my belly — but, by God!" hand dropping from his eyes, "I went through with it! I didn't hedge!"

He stared again at the closed door through which Helen had come to see and hear and through which she had gone again. He stepped forward, a half dozen quick strides.

"Helen!" he cried — "Helen!" — and stopped and waited. No reply, and he breathed again. "No — not now," he said. "Lord, no! Not now — not the chance of another mistake!"

CHAPTER XV

THE anger which had been in Marcia's face died long before she crossed Seven Mile Creek. She became a trifle pale, a little drawn of feature, as though she had been through an ordeal, as if she had bid high on a long chance and lost. But her eyes, though fast on the road, showed a degree of speculation that does not come often to the blue eyes of a golden-haired girl; they were not hopeless or dismayed, and when she reached the place where she had been stalled she did not turn into the road that would take her back to Windigo Lodge, but kept right on to Pancake, stopped her car at the Commercial House where she registered and was given a room, and from there she telephoned to Mrs. Mason, at Windigo.

"This is Marcia," she said gaily. "John won't let me come back tonight, so I'm going to stay over — yes, he's awfully busy — yes, I'm with Miss Foraker — delightful — see you all tomorrow —"

She hung up the receiver and stepped out of the booth, her mouth set.

"What time is the train from the south due?" she asked Henry.

"Nine-ten," he replied.

"That is the only one today?"

"Only one since noon."

The early June moon hung over Pancake as the night train slid to a stop, glorifying the ugly little town, softening the bad lines of its flimsy buildings, toning down the

colors with which they were painted, mellowing the nakedness of others. The night was very still and warm, and sweet with the purity of distances.

The river murmured to the village as it slid by and people sitting on their stoops talked back and forth, their voices carrying well in the night air. Philip Rowe came across the street beside Henry who had gone to the train to guide stray travelers to his shelter, and Marcia, from the hotel verandah, watched him come, rocking gently in the rickety chair, her cool smile hidden by the shadows.

She remained there while he registered and went to his room, waiting patiently, because the rooms were stuffy and she knew he would return. He came out of the door and stopped to light a cigar. She could see his frown in the glare of the match; she saw, too, the look of amazement when she spoke. He stared toward her incredulously and did not move until the match burned out. Then she laughed.

He came with quick steps and leaned over her chair. "Marcia Murray!"

"Why so dramatic?" She laughed as she let her hand rest in his.

"Of all places to find you!"

"You knew I was at Dick Mason's."

"But that's a long way from here!"

"Love," she said mockingly, "laughs at locksmiths and bad roads."

His hand tightened on hers till she winced.

"Oh, not that, Phil! You're so eager and impulsive — and such an optimist. I had no idea you were coming, though I believe John did mention it."

He dropped her hand and leaned against the railing.

"You were over here to see him," he said flatly.

Her clear laugh came again. "Of course, who else would I come to see? Though naturally, I'm glad that you are here tonight. I had planned a lonely evening. John doesn't know that I got off the road and missed my way until late. I was with him all day and he thinks I'm safe at Windigo. I would only worry him if I let him know."

Rowe pulled at his cigar.

"He's so busy! You'll hardly know him, Phil; he's quite changed."

"I expect so," drily. Pause.

"Why don't we walk?" Rowe asked. "I've ridden all —"

"Fine! Such a night!"

They went together, slowly, out along the board sidewalk to where it became but two planks laid side by side in the sand, and finally off that into the road itself.

"Don't you think John is doing wonderfully," Marcia asked.

Rowe shrugged and threw away his cigar rather impetuously, as though it had not pleased his taste. "He's doing something, yes, but the old man can't trust him. He's a kid in business; been lucky, but he has a deal on and Luke won't trust him to go it alone; that's why I am here."

Marcia lowered her face and he would have been startled had he seen its intentness. "But I thought his father was greatly pleased with what he had done?"

"Oh, in a way," grudgingly. "He doesn't trust him like he does me." There was something like a childish boast in the last.

"Then he hasn't overcome his father's prejudice?"

"No!" explosively.

"But if he should show big things?"

"He has to do that yet!"

"Don't you think this new idealism he's developing will appeal to his father? Or — mightn't he like it?"

Rowe glanced sideways at her; her face was still in the shadow.

"Just what do you mean — idealism?"

"Why his putting ideals above money. He came up here to make money and he has done that, has proven that he is capable of making it. He's seemed to outgrow that ambition, though I think it's splendid the way he wants to help Miss Foraker."

Rowe's fingers touched his chin speculatively.

"That's news to me," he said. "I came up to find out about this pine deal and what backing he wants."

Marcia looked up in a good counterfeit of surprise.

"Am I betraying a secret? I didn't mean to, really!"

"No secret. I'll know in the morning."

He urged gently for more information, but Marcia held it back long enough to whet his curiosity.

"Why, it's simply a matter of ideals," she finally said.

"His father, you see, made his fortune by cutting pine. Now John has been convinced by Miss Foraker that timber can be grown as a crop. He wants to see some of that fortune made out of old pine devoted to growing young pine — and undo some of the damage his father did to this country. He thinks his father owes something to — to the country; only, of course, he won't put it that way to Mr. Taylor. It's a conservation hobby — reforestation."

After a moment Rowe laughed: "Growing trees to look at, eh?"

"Well, for a time. He isn't sure that it will pay — it isn't profit he is after, anyhow."

Rowe was silent.

"A big idea isn't it?" she asked.

"Not for profit, eh?"

"Really Phil, I don't know detail. It's all very big and splendid. It dates away ahead for future generations. I tell him I don't think his father will take to the idea very readily. Do you? John, though, is all enthusiasm for it —"

Another period of silence; then from Rowe: "Are you sure of this?"

"Sure? Of course! He talked it all the afternoon."

His hand sought her arm and rested there none too lightly.

"And what do you think?" he asked. "What do you think Luke Taylor would say to putting his money into something for — coming generations — paying for what he's broke?"

"It doesn't sound much like him, does it?"

Rowe laughed harshly.

"I guess not! I guess *not*! He's had me jumping for months switching his investments so they're as good as cash! A bird in hand is worth a half dozen in the bush to him —"

He stopped and swung her about so that her face was toward the moon.

"Don't you know what this means? Don't you know what Luke will say?"

"Why — what, Phil?" breathlessly.

"You're right that John has caught the old man's interest. He has made a showing that tickled the old dog, but I knew that he wouldn't go far! I knew he'd make some fool break and have to be satisfied with being a rich man's son in the flesh — and not before the courts — when Luke dies."

"Phil!"

"Listen, Marcia! A new will is ready to be drawn. John is cut off with an annuity — about enough to keep a teamster and his wife in want. I'm to be named as administrator. I'm to control the Luke Taylor millions! It's a big job; it'll be a fat job!"

He had both her arms in his hands then, gripping their firm flesh. She drew back, alarm in her face — all but the eyes, which were steady and cool and calculating

"I used to think he was simply shiftless. I never imagined he was a nut! Do you want to marry a man and live on ideals? Do you want to tie yourself to a worthless kid or an improvident dreamer? Do you want to do that?"

"Phil, what are you saying —"

"I'm saying this," he muttered fiercely, bending close to her. "I'm saying that is it Phil Rowe and not John Taylor who will be able to give you the things you want? Oh, don't deny it! I know you, Marcia, your impulses, your desires! I know that a man must bid high for your love. I know you want not comfort but luxury, not position but independence.

"Until now I haven't figured with you much. Until now I've been Luke Taylor's bookkeeper, but I've been a good bookkeeper — I've gotten closer to him than his son ever did, than his son ever can now. I'll have a chunk of the estate for my — loyalty," with fine irony.

"That means that it's the bookkeeper, not the son, who can make you contented and happy!"

"Phil, you're trying to buy me!"

"Buy you? Yes!" as he dragged her to him and slid one arm about her shoulders. She struggled — very briefly — and then stood quiet, stilling the quaking of her limbs, as he talked into her hair, mingling kisses with words. "All women who are worth while are bought! Do you think I'd want you if you were cheap? Do you think I'd want a woman who would be content to grub and slave?"

"Luke will explode when he hears what's brought me here! Paying for what he broke! That's good! John will be cut off — I'll be as good as the old man's heir. And that means — that means you — for me!"

She struggled again when his hand pried her chin upward, but she did not struggle when his burning lips lay on her mouth — and after a moment hers responded to that caress. And then she was free, panting, smoothing her hair.

"What are you saying? What are you doing? Why should I let you?" But her eyes reflected no question and a wicked little flare of triumph ran across her features.

"Because I love you! Because you will love me!" he cried.

"Don't be too sure, Phil," but her voice was without the power of dissuasion. "We must go back now — don't Phil — you're hurting me!"

At the door of her room he stopped. A lonesome soiled incandescent burned in the red carpeted hall, but it was enough to show him the fire in her eyes, to reveal the

tempting curve of her lips as she smiled — tempting to distraction. Her hand was on the knob, the door was opening. He lurched forward, all assurance and desire —

She put up her hand quickly and laughed brittily.

“Marcia!” There was determination with the pleading in that word.

“No, Phil — tonight, I only — admire you — just that, Phil Rowe. No more — tonight —”

The door closed between them.

Out in the men’s shanty in Foraker’s Folly a man lay flat on his back, staring up into the darkness.

John Taylor had been wrong so many times. He had been wrong in everything these last weeks — from saw logs to Marcia Murray! He stirred restlessly. He had thought he understood women, as he had thought he understood himself; had believed that Marcia was sweet and kind and gentle. Today he had seen her claws, had felt them tearing at his pride. He had humbled himself before her because he had been wrong and had believed it the honorable way — but his mistake had been two-fold. He had loved her, but love had not brought her into his arms. The impelling influence was the hope of possessions, the lure of his father’s fortune, not the call of his own young heart.

“Mistakes! Mistakes!” His lips formed the soundless words. Well, there would be no more mistakes he promised himself, and stirred again. He was free from clouded thinking, his eyes were open. He had been deceived by his own inconsequential self, by life, by a girl, but from now on —

Of such is the resilient assurance of youth!

And at a window in the big house Helen Foraker sat on the floor looking into the summer night, ears closed to the music of the river and the talk of her pine trees. Words echoed in those ears, the words of that other girl, spoken that afternoon.

"I am going — to make way for you, Miss Foraker!" Bitter, stinging words, but they did not sting the memory. They stirred some remote thing in her heart, touched some hope, some impulse of which she had never until today been aware.

He *had* come as a little boy, he *had* changed, had grown up, and now another woman had made way for her. She raised her hands and looked at them in the dim light as though they were strange objects. They were strong and splendidly proportioned, but they were a bit rough, a bit red.

"Hers," she whispered, "were so small — so white —" She looked up quickly, lips parted, as though her words and what they indicated had frightened her.

CHAPTER XVI

For hours Philip Rowe lay wakeful in the lumpy bed in the Commercial House, first tossing in a fever of desire, later lying quietly while his mind spun.

Marcia Murray had played her hand well, superbly well for a losing hand. She had made the most of what John Taylor had told her, of what she knew of his father's character, and of how Rowe reacted to the news she let him worm from her.

For years Philip Rowe had bent his sharp wits toward gaining a place between the Taylors, father and son. Like young John he had wanted fortune, but he was not afraid to grub. He had been faithful to Luke, more faithful to himself; he had studied, he had learned, he had watched and waited. On that morning in Detroit when he took notes for the framing of a new will, he believed he had triumphed, but the arrival of the letter from John telling that he had turned his father's shabby trick to profit knocked the foundation from beneath his hopes — for a time. He did not give up, though for another it would have been difficult to keep hope alive before old Luke's delight over the change in his boy.

The new will was not drawn, but Rowe knew that behind Luke's reaction to John's success there was persistent skepticism. With the coming of John's letters, asking for backing in this vaguely defined new scheme, that skepticism challenged paternal favor. Rowe understood, Rowe watched closer than ever. He was sent to

Pancake to investigate with the knife of his self-seeking unsheathed, ready to strike at the first weakness Taylor might show.

And now it was so easy! Marcia had given him the best reason for hope that he had encountered in weeks. John Taylor, wanting to use his father's money for the gain of unborn generations! He smiled as he lay there. He would see Luke's face darken, could hear his stinging outburst.

Again his mind went back to Marcia. All winter she had toyed with him clandestinely in Florida. In Detroit he had seen much of her and the flirtation had been brisk — and tonight for the first time she had surrendered her lips and after she had given to him the information which seemed to open the way to an attainment of his dreams.

He sat up abruptly and stared out the window.

Had that been conscious? Had she realized, as he realized, the possibilities of this change in John's ambition? He drew a hand slowly through his hair and laughed quietly.

"You devil!" he whispered and laughed again, as if he had been fooled, and admired the wit that fooled him.

As surely as two ships in a motionless sea move toward one another, just that certainly will like personalities drift toward their kind. Rogue finds rascal; male flapper unerringly meets his congenial companion; intelligence discovers intelligence.

Marcia Murray had gone by the time Rowe awakened and Jim Harris was alone in the dining room when Phil entered. The men spoke gravely across the soiled linen,

and Jim rattled his paper and remarked casually on the headlines as he would to any stranger. But two hours later they stood in Harris' room, looking down into the street where Helen stopped her noisy car to let John Taylor out, and Harris looked at Rowe and winked as he might have winked at a companion of years.

"Quite a gal, what?" he chuckled. "And maybe that explains a lot, Rowe."

The other's lips twitched in a sardonic smile, and though he said nothing it was evident that he understood.

Taylor did not look at the hotel register, for Henry Wales was at the desk, struggling over one of his pale, inflammable cigars, else he would have seen the fine signature: "M. Murray, Detroit." That might have added to the trouble that lurked in his eyes, aftermath of yesterday's scene; or, to have linked her name with Rowe's might have been relief. No matter. John did not seek information from the register, but asked his question of Henry, who said that Mr. Rowe got in last night; was upstairs now. "This's him," as steps sounded on the stairs.

Rowe and Harris came down together and the former suavely greeted John, assured and superior.

"You know Mr. Harris, of course."

Yes, Taylor knew Harris, and as he acknowledged the acquaintance he looked from one to the other, sensing something of their kinship, but reading no import there — not then.

Harris went out. Taylor and Rowe went into the small and hideous parlor of the hotel. They smoked. They talked briskly of Luke and John's mother, of the lumber market, of the season, Rowe waiting like a cat at a mouse-

hole, Taylor uneasy. Face to face with his father's secretary he was impressed with a lack of sympathy for his new enthusiasm and he dreaded getting at the matter which had brought Rowe north.

Suddenly Rowe precipitated the subject: "I've been with your father over seven years, Taylor. I never saw him quite so worked up as he was over your last letter."

"I thought it must have interested him, sending you up here." John shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Michigan pine is to him — not like red to a bull; like freedom to a Bolshevik, perhaps."

Taylor smiled. "He's always lived in the past, with the pine, Rowe. I thought of that: that it might give him a chance to live in the future."

"Or to live in the present? That would be better. Your father can't have very many years left." Pause.

"When your letter came in, mentioning Michigan white pine in a big tract, he forgot his cane. He walked up and down the room without it — for the first time in years."

"That's fine!"

"He rushed me up here, not because he wouldn't take your word"—with a cautious glance at John, "but because he wants you to speed up the deal. He'll go in with you, if the values can be established; he wants camps operating this fall."

John started.

"Camps?"

"Surely. He knows he hasn't much time left. It's been his dream — to finish as he began: cutting Michigan pine; a dream without foundation until now."

Taylor shook his head.

"It's not a question of buying and logging," he said.

Rowe paused in the act of striking a match.

"You don't want to buy?" he asked incredulously.

"It couldn't be bought, in the first place; and it isn't ready for harvest yet — you see, Rowe —"

He sat forward and for half an hour talked of Foraker's Folly, of the country adjacent, of what it had been, of what it was now; talked of Thad Parker and his wife's death. He did not mention Jim Harris; some undefined warning checked the bitter sentence at his teeth and he went on from Michigan pine plains to lumber markets and supply — He was careful to explain clearly, to make no over-statement. He went into the history of Helen's forest, told what he knew of the forest practice thereof, of the fire prevention, of the thinnings, the income and the future plans.

"I see," said Rowe when he had finished, and looked through the window with a malignant twinkle in his black eyes. "It's a case of — of taking some of the money that was made from Michigan pine to grow more Michigan pine."

"Exactly!"

"And — perhaps making some of that fortune perform a duty which most men wouldn't recognize: putting it to work to help pay for some of the ruin it made of this country?"

"You get the idea, Rowe!" Taylor burst out enthusiastically, and stopped shortly. He did not like the straightening of the other's arm in its coat sleeve as Rowe raised his cigar to his lips. It smacked of a gesture of triumph and Rowe continued staring through the window.

Before John could say more Rowe asked: "And how much help will you need?"

"I don't know."

"You haven't anything to go on, then?" as if disappointed.

"Not yet. You see, Miss Foraker needs help very badly, I think. I — I didn't want to hold out any false hopes to her. I wanted to be sure before I mentioned it."

"I see —" Once more the gleam of triumph came into his eye. "Have you had it estimated?"

"No. I've gone on the opinion of others."

"Your father wired Tolman, his old cruiser, to meet me here. He should be up from Saginaw today. It won't take him long to give us something definite and dependable."

"The value's there, all right," John said. "Tolman's report should satisfy father. I suppose he'll want that first." He had risen.

"Surely," said Rowe, lightly enough. "A matter of a few days — and it won't take him long to make up his mind when he hears the facts," with a light sniff.

"You'll stay on, then?"

"I think not. I'll get out as soon as Tolman gets in, which'll probably be tonight."

They halted on the steps of the hotel.

"I don't suppose, then, there's any chance of buying?" Rowe asked.

"Not one in the world!"

"But if this Miss — Miss Foraker needs help so badly, I should think —"

"You don't know her! She'd lose everything before she'd listen to talk of selling!"

"And you wouldn't try to influence her?"

John shook his head emphatically.

"Buying is out of the question, Phil. That's one reason I want to help her — so no man can ever come in and take advantage of her circumstances, force a sale and ruin this plan."

"She's converted you to her idea all right!"

"By Jove, Rowe, she has that! I'd as soon lose my right arm as see that stuff cut now."

"You inspire me!"

They parted and Rowe went inside to stand by the window watching John swing along the sidewalk.

"Your right arm, eh? Well — by making that crack — about your right arm, you may lose your birthright."

He examined the time table hanging beside the desk and then entered the telephone booth. His call was for Miss Marcia Murray, at Windigo Lodge.

That afternoon Jim Harris and Philip Rowe drove north from Pancake. They did not stop at the Harris development project, though they left the main road there. They went on, along a seldom used trail, coming eventually to the southwest corner of Foraker's Folly. They left the car and crossed the fire line and within the shelter of the ranks of pine trees Rowe took a small camera from his pocket. They walked three miles or more through the forest, stopping now and then where the light and perspective were right to preserve for the discontented eyes of Luke Taylor the things which theirs could see.

They were together that night at supper, together when the nine-ten arrived, bringing the small, silent Tolman,

turkey slung over his shoulder. They sat together a half hour later on the baggage truck on the station platform, waiting for the down-bound train.

"It's good," said Harris, rolling his cigar with satisfaction, "to have somebody I can talk to without doing a lot of rattling around and side-stepping. I can help you, Rowe, and I'd sure welcome some other substantial interests to this country."

"I think they're on their way," said his companion.

Harris nodded emphatically.

"I think so, too. I hope so — And I'll work to realize that hope. Anyhow, we've got a common interest. I've been a good servant for Pontiac Power and they've given me my chance with a big piece of this development proposition, but, damn it all, they expect me to do all their dirty work up here without any backing. I've protected their interests all right and I've made some money for myself, but I want to make a lot of money, Rowe — a *lot* of it. I need roads and schools to build up that project; I'm going to have 'em, too — an' when she sees her tax bill — that's going to help you! She won't be able to stand the racket — she won't be able to get her breath when I get through with her."

He laughed good naturedly.

"And she's alone? She hasn't any backing?"

"Not any that's worth a damn except —" He turned his head to look up First Street to where a light showed above the office of the *Banner*; he flicked the ash from his cigar and cleared his throat. "Just one old anarchist, Hump Bryant."

"The senator?"

"Yup," sourly. "Course he and I ain't clashed yet,

but it's bound to come. He commenced stirrin' up a dust about timber taxes a few years ago. That was all right; he couldn't get anywhere and I wouldn't have kicked on that, anyhow. But now he's spreadin' out and 's asking too damn many questions about farms that are started and abandoned on these light lands. He wants to start some nutty land reform movement. We'll mix, yet. He's treading mighty close to my bunions. And he's lined up with the gal, all right. He's her port when it blows uncomfortable hard."

In the far distance the down train whistled and Rowe stood up, shaking his coat.

"About this other, though? This matter of taxes? You think you're safe there? You've got the supervisors thinking your way?"

Harris brushed ashes from his breast and laughed.

"*Thinkin'?* Hell, Rowe, these yaps haven't got anything to think *with*. But as for *havin'* them —" He thrust out one hand and held it close to the other's face, fist clenched. "Like that!" he said beneath his breath.

In other places in Pancake that night Helen Foraker was in the minds of men. In the bank of Pancake, for one, where Ezam Grainger sat at his desk, securities spread before him, going through the papers, making neat notes. His tight little face was harried and the stiff, straight collar slightly wilted from the moisture of his wrinkled neck, and now and then he muttered to himself.

From the stack of mortgages he took the next document. It was a paper covering title to three sections of Foraker's Folly: it was for \$20,000. It was due, he saw, within three weeks. And when he put it down he checked it

on a list before him and wrote beside it the one word: "Renew."

The door opened and Doctor Pelly came in. Ezam frowned over his glasses to identify the newcomer, then started up eagerly and opened the gate in the office railing.

"You've been to the house, doctor?" he asked nervously.

The physician shoved back his derby wearily and took a morsel of chewing tobacco from a pocket of his unbuttoned vest, winking roguishly, and apparently unmindful of Ezam's agitation.

"Better 'n Blaud's, Ezam," he said, taking a chair and stretching out his dusty shoes with a sigh. "Yeah, I've been over to see Lily."

Grainger fidgeted in his chair. His eyes showed, with their eagerness, a rare timidity.

"You two are all het up over nothing," Pelly said, and the other stiffened as though the pronouncement were an affront. "If I was a young doctor and not a friend, I'd welcome patients like your wife, Ezam. They've given many a young cub his start; nothin' better in the way of practice than a nervous woman with plenty of money. Nothing you can do for 'em, so there's no danger of their gettin' well. Only way you can lose 'em is to fail to take 'em seriously."

He winked again and the banker cleared his throat.

"Why in Sam Hill don't you an' Lily light out of here?" Pelly asked bluntly. "You can do more for her than I can, Ezam. You and your car and a part of your income spent liberal like."

Grainger settled back in his chair, reassured by the confidence in the doctor's tone.

"You've been here since the hills were hollows. You've made your pile. What's the idea of keepin' on?"

"Why — why, a man must keep busy."

Pelly negotiated the cuspidor safely.

"Busy, hell! You've been busy enough to last three or four lifetimes. The trouble with Lily is she ain't been busy enough. If — if there'd been more children there wouldn't 've been this trouble; if you'd call it a job and pulled out half a dozen years ago you wouldn't 've been in this stew."

He took off his derby and mussed his thin hair.

"You know, Ezam," crossing his knees, "Lily wasn't cut out for Pancake. It was all right for a while, but now it's used up her interest and 's after her nerve. Shucks! You're going to dry up and blow away in some hot wind yourself if you don't play a little! Sell your toy bank or give it away or somethin'! You've made your pile; you can play the rest of your life and never think twice about a new pair of shoes if prices never go down! Put Lily in your car, set fire to the house, light out for Maine for the summer, do New York in the fall and see the boy, drop over to California for the winter and maybe give Honolulu the once-over in the spring. Come back and look in on us in the summer for a few weeks; on your way again!"

He waved his hand elaborately. "Simple as skinnin' a cat!"

"You don't understand, doctor. It's —"

"Course I understand! You're in a rut and think th' world depends on your runnin' the bank of Pancake. Lily's in a rut, too, and Pancake's holdin' her in it. Don't try to tell me there's anything to hold you here but a habit. You know, Ezam, if I was fixed like you are,

now —" He scratched his head fiercely and spit again and winked and ambled on, telling of how he would play, given the opportunity.

The down train stopped and went on. Jim Harris tapped on the window and waved his hand and passed. Talk within lagged.

"Tim Burdick's wife 's due for another kid or so tonight," Pelly said rising. "Got to get along." He buttoned his vest.

"Maybe there's something in what you say," Ezam admitted. "Our own affairs always seem large — and Lily — is all I have, now — she and the bank —"

He looked through the window and saw Harris mount the steps of the Commercial House.

"Widdemer, the new vice-president of Pontiac Power, was in from Bay City the other day. He'd be interested to buy, I think."

Pelly looked sharply at him.

"That so? He made an offer?"

"Well, not exactly, he wanted me to make one."

"That's reasonable. You do it, Ezam. There's nothing wrong with Lily now, but women are funny machines. She's all you've got — if she was mine — well, I'd want to give her a chance." He was grave then and gave his head a serious twist.

"Pontiac Power wants the bank, eh?" the doctor muttered. "Well, they're all right so far as I know, but between you and me and the rest of the town, Ezam, Harris don't wear very well." He shrugged. "I'd hate to think of Thad Parker's wife if I was him — and a lot of other men and women. Hear anything about his new road proposition?"

The banker nodded.

"He wants it — bad."

"He'll get it, then."

"He always has."

"And Foraker's Folly is going to hold the bag?"

"Oh, I don't think he could work that, but maybe he'll make Helen trouble. Humphrey thinks so. He's feeling the supervisors out, I'm told."

The doctor's mouth shut grimly.

"Yes, Hump is getting busy. Bless his old hide!"

"Well, most everybody has trouble," he remarked. "Wish everybody had as easy a way out as you have, Ezam. Night. Have another voter for Pontiac Power by morning, I expect."

The door closed. Ezam went slowly back to his desk and sat there, stiff and prim on the chair, but his eyes dreamed.

And across the way in his rooms above the office of the *Banner*, Humphrey Bryant rocked in a chair that lurched sideways each time he swayed forward. His shoes were off, spectacles pushed back on his head. The windows were open and he sat alone, looking out to where the lights of the Commercial House and the unusual gleam from the bank windows threw beams across the white dust of the street.

On the opposite side of the window was another chair, which he had drawn from its accustomed corner before he sat down; a wooden rocker, stuffed with calico pillows and draped with the same limp material. It had been in that corner ever since the old man had begun living alone, when Maggie Bryant gave up and was taken out to the

plot of barren ground on the edge of the village and buried beneath the jack pines. Usually that rocker stood in its corner undisturbed weeks at a time, but occasionally there came a night, as this one, when his step on the stairs was slow, when he sighed wearily as he pulled off the Congress shoes, and at such times he would draw the chair out to a place by the stove in winter, to this place by the window in summer, and sit beside it and rock, and touch it now and then and talk to it — a great deal.

"She seems more like our own, Maggie," he said after a time. "I sat looking at her today in the office and she seemed like our own girl, not like some other man's — I s'pose that's 'cause she's young and sweet and the sort we'd like to have had for a daughter — if we'd ever had any — and she's in trouble too — though she don't know the worst yet — and needs a family —"

Silence, with the frogs and night insects far off.

"No, Maggie," shaking his head, "it won't do to hope too much. Sim Burns has talked a lot and stirred folks up and maybe if he was inclined to back down now he couldn't — and save his face —

"Looked up the assessed valuation of Chief Pontiac Power today — dams, buildings, key positions was all I knew — they've got it at two hundred thousand — they've got six millions in the county or I've got six legs."

He rocked a little more violently, the chair rumbling on the thin carpet.

"It's Harris I'm afraid of — he's intelligent and without scruple — which makes a worthy foe. He's shrewd — I've prodded around a little, but they're

mighty close with their plans." He twisted his head and folded his hands across his stomach.

"Poor Helen — I don't know — she's always come to me when she's been in trouble and I've always been able to help her — but this time — I won't have much to say — maybe nothing —"

For long he rocked there, talking to the memory of the woman whose empty rocker was beside him. Late at night he rose and from his vest pocket drew the worn notebook with pages devoted to dates and hours and the names of men. He studied it gravely.

On the date at the top of a page he placed a gnarled finger. "An ace," he muttered. "They're always the first week in the month, when Pontiac Power pays off its other help." He moved his finger to the first column, which recorded the time and nodded briskly. "Another ace; there never have been two at once." He scanned the names written there and riffled the pages, on each of which was set down the personnel of the board of supervisors. "A third ace — they are *all* there — every time—" He closed the book and held it between his old palms.

"And — there's a card in the hole, but I'm afraid to look at it — and threes, even aces, aren't much to bet everything on."

CHAPTER XVII

AGAIN the wide room in the Detroit House, with its windows giving on the formal garden, the group of white pines and the river. Luke Taylor sat there, his eyes fixed on the pines, listening to the deliberate, finely detailed report which his private secretary gave him. For an hour Rowe had talked, making no obvious effort to stress any one point, but watching the eyes that did not watch him, seeing the enthusiasm which had been in them give way to a cold light, watching that light grow hot, seeing the old lips work now and then; and prodding, when he knew that he had struck to the quick.

He finished and dropped the memoranda he had used to the table beside him. For an interval the old man did not move and when his position did change it was only a turn of the head to set his hard gaze on the other's face.

"You're sure of this, Rowe?"

"I've qualified everything I wasn't sure of."

"And he said that, did he? That he wanted to use my money for this — this damn moonshine?"

"Just as I've told you, sir."

"And that this was his reason: so no man could ever force her to cut until she gets good and ready?"

"Those were his words, as I remember them, sir. He said, too, that he'd rather lose his right arm than see her pine logged off."

Luke stirred and his palms tapped the arms smartly while he licked his lips.

"So *he's* commenced to worry about other generations, has he? So *he's* got to be one of the old women in pants! I s'pose he thinks I'm a devastator, that I was little better than a crook when I took off my pine! So he wants me to use my money to wash away my sins, does he?"

He half rose from his chair and a purple rage swept into his face, making his hard eyes watery, making his lips tremble. "So *he's* one —"

A maid rapped and entered with a package and Luke broke short. But perhaps he had no words, anyhow, to relieve the seethe of passion that was in his heart.

"For you, Mr. Rowe," the girl said.

"These are photographs I took yesterday," he said, breaking the string. "I had the finishing rushed — I knew —"

"Eh? What's this? Pictures?" Luke's anger was neutralized for the moment by his interest. "Pictures of the pine, Rowe?"

"Yes, sir — see —"

He spread the damp prints on the table before him and Luke with unsteady hands adjusted his spectacles and leaned forward to see. For a lengthy interval he scanned the dozen photographs, going from one to the other, dropping back to study some feature that caught special attention, scarcely breathing; gradually his hands shut down closer on the chair arms and a snapping light appeared in his blue eyes, a hungry light, a glad light, fierce in its hunger and in its joy.

"Pine!" he muttered, almost reverently. "Michigan White Pine, Rowe! Baby pine! Good God — it's small — but thick as hair on a dog!"

He snatched off his spectacles and snapped: "Tolman was there?"

"Got in last night."

"And when 'll he report?"

"Tomorrow night, anyhow."

Luke leaned back weakly and breathed rapidly. He drew out his great gold watch and eyed it.

"Twelve o'clock," he whispered. "That means — thirty-six hours." His lips shut as decisively as the case of the watch: with the same sort of definite snap. "Thirty-six hours," he repeated petulantly. "But then — we can't rush this thing! We've got to be sure, Rowe! Don't you go gettin' my hopes up without reason! Hopes of camps for the fall! God, with camps of my own in Michigan Pine they could throw that damn Floridy into the gulf! I wouldn't need their pesky sunshine to take the chill of Michigan rivers out of my bones then, Rowe!

"An' he said, did he, that he'd rather lose a leg than see that stuff cut?"

"It was an arm, sir —"

"Don't be so damned accurate, Rowe! Arm, eh? He's likely to get one whole side torn off!"

At dusk that evening old man Tolman unpacked his turkey which he had cached on the bank of a small creek that ran across the plains and into Foraker's Folly. He spread his blankets, built a very small fire, made coffee and fried bacon. He worked deftly, with the precision of a man who has lived well on little, scoured his dishes with sand, dropped a pair of green sticks on the coals and sat down in the smoke to defy the mosquitoes. He lighted his pipe there and puffed slowly, but after several

moments his eyes went to the ragged banners of the solid pine beyond him, blue-black against the fading rose of the sky, and his puffing became more rapid, almost fevered and continued so until a sputter from the pipe bowl indicated that nothing remained but an expiring coal.

He rapped it against the heel of his boot and drew out a package of Peerless. He shook his head and sighed and almost smiled.

"I'll be blistered!" he muttered. "I'll be blistered! Pine — in a stand like that! Old Luke 'll go wild — clean, plumb, hog wild!"

And while Tolman watched the last glory of the dying day, Helen Foraker held her canoe against the rushes on the inside of a sharp bend in the river, while John Taylor in the bow shot his fly out across the swift current to where it milled against the far bank.

The water above them was old rose, like the sky, and a faintly violet mist hung over the stream, blending with the bottle-green of pine trees. The air was cool and damp and sweet, and from the water back in the rushes, from the midst of the current itself, May flies were hatching, coming to the surface like bubbles, spreading their new, damp wings, struggling a moment and then rising into the air to mingle with millions of their kind, to find mates, to function and pass on in their brief cycle, weakened by their hour of life, dropping back to the water which had given them life and into which they had put the life of their kind.

All about the surface was broken as fish rose to feed on the insects, but the girl's eyes were fixed on the deep

pool across from them, and Taylor's eyes were there as well, and the fly went there again and again as a fish broke the white-flecked velvet blue of deep water rising from his lair to fall back with mighty splashes.

For twenty minutes Taylor sent his fly in, picked it up, dried it by false casts, drove it forward and let it rush over the pool; and the trout kept feeding all about that lure, selecting from the myriads of flies that swept over him only those which meant life — not death.

Rhythmatically, like a machine, the man cast, and finally the girl's eyes left the fish to watch him in silhouette against the sky, which had become pale orange. His hat was off and his profile was cleanly cut. She could see the ripple of arm and shoulder muscles beneath his shirt, could watch the good poise and co-ordination of trunk with limb as his whole splendid body went into the cast. And then the fish struck!

With an expulsion of breath like a glad, muffled cry, Taylor's right arm whipped back, above and behind his head. The bamboo bent in a stiff arc. His left arm tooled the line carefully as he gave out, as he took in, and the line itself where it disappeared into the current, laid back fin after fin of silvered water as the trout plowed here and there in his depths in frantic effort to be free. Upstream, downstream, across and back; sulking, moving slowly, rushing mightily; coming to the surface and showing his dorsal fin as he dived again; roving the bottom for snags or rocks that would cut the leader; for ten minutes the fish fought with the nobility which only the speckled trout puts into his will to live, and then he came gasping to net, looking like a dying flame with the crimson of his fins, the rich coloring of his belly.

"Good work!" Helen cried and dropped her paddle. "A beauty! He'll go two pounds. And you did it well!"

Her eyes danced, her red lips parted in a glad smile and there was an excitement in her face, which Taylor had never seen there before, the enthusiasm for play, and as he looked at her, leaning forward, one arm stretched out to touch the trout, he saw a new part of her to dove-tail with her capability at her work, her tenderness with children: she was at that moment, a laughing, spontaneous young animal, lost in admiration of the fish he had caught, and in admiration of him. He knew this last; he could see it in her eyes.

They went downstream under the stars, Helen in the bow, singing in her clear voice the chant of the old French boatmen, picked up when she was a little girl from some woodsman.

They dragged the canoe out together, and their hands touched. It was the first time their flesh had met and a queer thrill ran through Taylor's body. He took his catch and walked with Helen to the door. She bade him good-night and went within very quietly. He watched her and moved on to the men's shanty, heedless of Pauguk who whined at her chain's length as he passed.

Jim Harris was inside, talking to Goddard. His speech was a bit louder than usual, he was a trifle eager, it seemed to John, to have it known that he had come to inquire after teams that would soon be finished with the hardwood logs; a few men and horses were needed at the lower dam, he said.

Beauchamp, the cook, and Harris and another gathered about Taylor and commented on his catch. Goddard did not leave his bunk where he sat, elbows on knees, glowering

at John. Black Joe, who was sewing a button on his shirt, looked up and grunted in disdain as Taylor proudly held up the big trout. The cook took the fish to the kitchen. Harris sat down beside Goddard and talked. Two men remained with Black Joe who, as he drew thread clumsily through the flannel, resumed the talk that Taylor had interrupted.

"Now how about this here gold mine of Paul's, Joe?" one of them asked.

The old fellow puffed on his short pipe a moment and then began to talk, lowly, haltingly, and those with him listened eagerly, set smiles on their faces.

It was another Paul Bunion story, Taylor knew, and watched and tried to overhear, but could not. Ever since coming into this country he had heard references to Paul Bunion. "Who is he?" he had once asked Helen and she had laughed: "The Munchausen of the forests, my father used to say. He also said that Paul would be in living literature when the Baron was forgotten."

That explained little, but Taylor gathered that Joe was an authority on the great Paul. Night after night he would sit with a few of those who were beyond his scorn listening while he ambled on. He was jealous of his tales, though, reserving them only for those who stood in his favor. Taylor had tried to join the group, but each attempt had caused Joe to drop into sullen silence, broken only when John withdrew.

As he fussed aimlessly about his bunk, Taylor watched Harris and Goddard. Jim talked confidentially, easily, and Goddard listened, smoking a cigar, evidently flattered by the attention. But that attention was not wholly for Goddard because Harris' eyes went from time to time to

Black Joe and when the two who listened to the story of the gold mine laughed heartily Harris stopped talking altogether and smiled and a certain restlessness showed in his eyes.

Beauchamp came in and prepared to shave. Harris rose and walked toward Joe's bunk.

"Joe, have a cigar," he said.

The woodsman stopped talking. He eyed Harris slowly as he had at first eyed John Taylor. He removed his pipe and spat and said:

"Who? Me? I promised my mother I'd never smoke 'em!"

Harris rumbled a laugh, but flushed slightly, for the contempt in Joe's manner was unmistakable.

"All right then, I'll keep 'em for the wicked, Joe. Go on with your story," sitting down.

"Story? What story?" Joe asked, black eyes blazing and turned away and put the gnawed pipe stem between his teeth and smoked in confusing silence.

Harris attempted to recover his poise, but he did not urge a resumption of the tale, and soon was gone, followed as far as his waiting car by Goddard.

Beauchamp was laughing as he lathered his face and winked at John.

"Py gosh, Jim Harris she don' nefer get Joe to tell heem 'bout Paul Bunion." He lifted two fingers of the hand which held the razor. "For two year, now, he come here for Joe to tell heem 'bout Paul. Wan taam, before she go dry, he make Joe drunk an' try, but Joe —" shaking his head, "she don' gife wan damn for Jim Harris. She nefer say wan word 'bout Paul when he's 'roun'.

"I tell heem, Joe you wan beeg fool. Jim Harris pay

you money for to tell 'bout Paul — but Joe she don' care 'bout money. Py gosh, I can' maak moch from dat man, Joe —

“An' Jim Harris — py damn, dat's all he wan' dat he don' git: Joe, for to tell heem 'bout Paul Bunion! Eferybody in Pancake, she know what Harris wan' an' what he can' get!” He shrugged and lifted the razor to his cheek.

Jim had driven away and Goddard stood alone. He glanced within the men's shanty and saw Taylor talking to the cook. One of the great hands at his side closed slowly and he walked away toward the big house where Helen sat at her desk, turning idly the pages of a lumber trade journal.

“Did you have a good time — fishing?” he asked.

She had looked up at his entrance; at his tone she dropped her eyes.

“Yes, Milt. We made a nice catch.”

He laughed shortly. “I notice you haven't took time to fish with me this spring.”

“No, we've both been very busy.”

“Yeah — both of us. But you ain't too busy to go out with Taylor.”

A quick flush appeared in her cheeks. “That's entirely uncalled for Milt. You do a lot lately to make it unpleasant for me. I don't think it's fair in you and I don't like it because — you haven't the right.”

The hand at his side closed tightly again. “No right,” he growled. “Maybe not. Before he come up here, though, you used to think enough of me.”

“I thought of you then as I do now: as a good friend, as a loyal friend, as a man who has done more for me in

the actual work than any one else." Her manner was very positive.

"Nothing else?" he demanded.

She looked down and shook her head. "Nothing else, Milt. You should know that. You have tried to persuade me to think — differently of you. It — it has made it very hard for me, because I don't want to hurt you,— and I can't —"

"And yet you'll run around with this — this —" gesturing toward the men's shanty.

"Which is my own affair," she said simply. "I'm sorry, but there must be a limit to what I let you say."

"Maybe that's what interests me," he said sharply, narrowing his eyes and leaning over the desk. "Maybe I'm interested because it's your own affair, and what happens to you — means a lot to me," voice dropping to a whisper. "I don't want you to make any mistakes that you will be sorry for."

His heart was racing, hot words of jealousy clamored to be out, but he repressed them, and searching wildly for some device which would grip her interest and give him different standing in her eyes, he threw out that empty threat.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

His baseless innuendo had struck the mark! She believed that it was backed by something other than his helpless jealousy. He flushed hotly and stood erect.

"Never mind what I mean," he said. "Maybe I can't tell you — just tonight. I don't want to say anything against anybody until I'm sure."

"But you make hints!" insistently.

"Yes, I'd do a lot to help you, Helen."

She rose and moved about the desk toward him, placing a hand on his shoulder. He dropped his gaze and plucked at a paper.

"I know that, Milt," she said. "I know you'd do anything for me. There is — there's nothing between Mr. Taylor and me. Please believe that." Her color had mounted.

"I know there ain't — much — yet —" he mumbled. "I don't want there to be, because —"

"I'm waiting," when he did not finish.

He looked up at her and was again assured when he saw the sober query in her face.

"So am I — waitin' to be sure. But I'd take a chance at being wrong, at being unfair to anybody for you — unfair to anybody, let alone him!"

An hour later the lights were out and in the men's shanty snores were heavy, but Goddard lay awake, flushed with helpless anger. It was little satisfaction to know that his groundless warning had troubled Helen. The time might come when he would be called to explain and he was seized with an agony of helplessness.

There in the lamplight, she had looked so lovely, so wonderful! She was not his kind, she was finer, gentler, of different stuff, but for five years he had served her loyally, had worked night and day, had fought for her on occasion; and through these years he had come to covet her, come to picture without good reason her life united with his. There had been no opposition, no competition except the gulf between them until this Taylor came. From the first he had sensed the fact that the city man was nearer Helen than he ever could

come, and he loved as he had never loved before — and he hated as he did not know he could hate.

He clutched the blankets in his great hands and twisted them. There was so little he could do! But he did not know that over by a quiet stream old man Tolman lay awake, staring up at the stars, marvelling at what he had seen that day; or that Luke Taylor muttered and cocked his head to hear the breeze sounding in the white pines that stood in his garden and recalled those photographs he had seen that day, or that Philip Rowe sat in his room smoking, thin lips drawn in a strange smile of triumph.

These he could not know, and he did not know that in another bunk in that same building another man lay sleepless, hearing again the bitter words of Marcia Murray, quailing from them, suffering, and feeling that pain and humiliation absolved by the touch of Helen Foraker's hand on his, beside the Blueberry that evening.

CHAPTER XVIII

So passed Tuesday. And Wednesday passed, fair and clear and peaceful overhead and in the forest. The last of the rafts were coming down the river without trouble or delay; the band-saw in the mill ate steadily through the good logs, the piles of lumber beside the track grew. There was no hint of trouble and the shaking that John Taylor's very soul had undergone in his scene with Marcia steadily subsided under three influences: the first was the fact that he had made peace with himself; the second, that he had won his father's trust and interest in his plan, so in a matter of days he would be able to tell Helen Foraker that the threat which Sim Burns held over her could be met with a laugh; and the third influence was the girl of the forest herself, whose charm and consequence grew hourly, bringing a strange combination of peace and restlessness.

But Wednesday evening Jim Harris' car rolled out toward Foraker's Folly again and picked up Tolman who, his turkey packed, stood beside the unused road waiting. Two hours later, the old cruiser sat in the telephone booth in the Commercial House, pouring his information over the wire into the ear of Luke Taylor, who clutched the receiver and strained forward, whose eyes glittered avidly as he listened and whose responses were short, profane and joyful.

Thursday afternoon John was in Pancake, billing out

another shipment of his lumber, arranging for more cars. He finished his errand and stood in the small ticket office making some necessary notes when the telegraph key set up an insistent clamor. The agent cut in and answered, slipped blanks into the typewriter and began to take.

John started out.

"Wait — this 's for you," the man said.

Taylor closed the door and stood beside the operator's chair, reading his name and address as it went down, letter by letter.

And then came this, a letter, a syllable, a word at a time:

"Rowe says you would rather lose right arm than see pine you brought to my attention cut. If you want to help me in logging this place I will use you. If not, get away from the wheels. They are going to go round and you will regret reckless offer of anatomy in name of moonshine.— L. Taylor."

He took the yellow sheet and stared blankly at the typed message. He heard the operator say, "Sign this," in a voice that came from a great distance. He walked out of the station and stood on the platform, reading the warning again, numb and bewildered.

Luke Taylor wanted Foraker's Folly! His father, who had experienced his highest moments when his men were taking pine forests from the Michigan valleys, who had grumbled since John could remember that there was no joy in living, who had dreamed aloud of Michigan pine, who had wistfully, irately voiced the futile wish that he might finish his years as he began his ascendancy to fortune, harvesting more of the pine which had made

him a power! His father saw happiness at last in Helen Foraker's pine! His father wanted to do that which John had wanted to make forever impossible! His father, greedy, stubborn, powerful even in his wornout body, wanted to possess and cut that timber, making of the forest lumber and blackened slashing!

He stopped on the walk and read the message again, and thrust his hands into his pockets and stared blankly across the street. He did not see the office of the *Banner* or the poolroom or any of the flimsy, familiar buildings. He saw his father's face, saw the ruthless light in his eyes, saw the thin lips stretch in a greedy smile, and heard his hard voice saying the things that had come to him by telegraph.

"Oh, God," he muttered. "I wanted to help — and I brought this on her!"

He went into the bank to make a deposit. He heard Ezam Grainger say to a farmer:

"No, she isn't so well today — yes, I've sold and am going to take her right out of here," and clear his throat and blink rapidly to keep the mist of worry from his eyes.

Taylor gave no heed, no more did he know what Jim Harris said when they met on the bank steps, or what Henry Wales said when he entered the Commercial House to call Detroit by telephone.

It seemed hours before the connection was made. He walked the office floor and read and re-read that telegram; the paper grew wet from the nervous moisture of his fingers and finally the letters themselves blurred before his eyes as the import of what he had done revealed its awful possibilities. Better anything than this: Luke Taylor the destroyer, with his will and fortune, set against Helen

Foraker, who played a lone hand for an intangible thing like an ideal.

The telephone bell whirled.

"Yes, Taylor?"

It was Rowe's voice.

"I was calling father, Phil."

"He understands that. He wants me to talk for him."

"Isn't he there?"

"Right here beside me."

"Then let me talk to him, please!"

Pause. He heard Rowe's voice, much fainter. "He insists on talking to you, sir." Another voice, but he could not distinguish the words; then:

"Your father still wants to know if you think more of that pine forest than you do of your right arm?"

"I — I haven't changed my mind since you were here."

A wait, hollow, indistinct voices. "I will be up again Sunday — your father says if you change your mind you may talk it over with me then. I have authority to deal for him."

His voice was very even, impersonal, but somehow it stung John as though it had been a crow of triumph. He waited a moment, breathing rapidly.

"Very well, Rowe," he said finally. "I will talk to you Sunday. Good-bye."

He walked from the hotel and Humphrey Bryant appeared in the doorway of his office rather excitedly.

"Going back soon?"

"As quick as I fill up with gas."

"Stop in, will you? I've a note for Helen."

He turned back into the office, drawing his spectacles down from his forehead, thin white hair standing high

above his pink scalp. He seemed hurried and flustered and when Taylor returned for the message he thought the bright blue eyes looked at him almost with hostility. Surely, trouble was in them, and the old editor was curt in his manner.

All the way home Taylor drove doggedly. A part of him wanted to turn back, to go away, to leave this mess which he had brought down upon Foraker's Folly. Oh, he had wanted to help, and he had brought the ideal which was represented in the pine forest face to face with a hungry power which was its worst enemy! He had wanted to help and had done the worst he could have done by conscious planning. He had wanted to lighten the burden on Helen's shoulders and had increased it to a crushing weight — so he wanted to run — to run.

That was the mean part of him, that was the impulse which was out of the question. There was but one thing for him to do: Tell her, face the fact, stand beside her and fight his father — with his inexperience and bare hands.

A sudden emptiness came about his middle, as though strength had drained from his vitals.

Helen was not at home when he entered, prepared to blurt out his confession. He left the note from Bryant on her desk and went out, so absorbed in his problem that he even forgot Pauguk and went too close and had to leap beyond her reach as she rushed at him, snarling wickedly.

He could not eat that night, and Beauchamp made much of his bad appetite, complaining half in fun as he brought food to the table.

"Ah well," the Frenchman said finally, nodding his

head. "I unnerstan', M'sieur Taylor. Eet iss spring. All de bird, she buil' nest; all de animal, she maak lofe. An' a yo'ng man, she feel her 'eart turn ofer, too. Eh?"

He laughed and others laughed and John flushed. He was conscious of Goddard's eyes on him with glowering ill temper.

Helen did not return till after dusk. Taylor had been walking the river bank, miserable and at once impatient and filled with dread. He saw her standing beside her desk, scanning intently a single sheet of paper. He ran forward. His rap was most perfunctory; he opened the screen and stepped in.

She turned and faced him and he saw fright in her face that chilled his heart. Just for that instant, and then she turned and went unsteadily across the room saying:

"I can't talk to you — Mr. Taylor — tonight."

Did she know? Was she aware of what he had done? He managed to say:

"Wait, Helen!" There was that in his husky tone which checked her against the far door. Breath clogged in his throat, but he heard himself saying: "Tell me why you can't talk to me."

He crossed the room toward her, bound to hold her there if necessary, to tell his wretched story quickly, to save himself not at all, and to offer all he had to offer as help.

He was decisive, showing a strength she had not seen before, a power which held her there. He stopped within arm's length of the girl and looked into her face. He saw no anger, no resentment; just misery. She was unpoised, she was shaken, like a little girl who has been badly frightened.

"What is it?" he demanded. "Why can't you talk to me. I must know — because I have something to say to you."

He spoke swiftly, with desperate assurance, but the desperation did not carry to her: only the assurance. He seemed strong, big and so much in earnest, with no humility, no deference. She held the paper she had been reading toward him with a gesture that was almost timid.

"That explains," she said, and stood there, fingers spread on her breast while he moved nearer the light to read.

It was the note he had brought from Humphrey Bryant, written on a sheet of news print.

"Dear Helen: — I can't trust the telephones and must stay on the job to do what I can, so this news must go to you by note. Gird yourself for fighting and trouble.

"A special meeting of the supervisors is called for Saturday, set ahead two weeks, I understand, solely because I have been trying to head it off. They will take action to submit the bonds for roads and a new court house at a July election. If this goes through, it will be hard to stop their pillaging, for we have not been mistaken in the property which they expect will pay the bill.

"To make matters worse, Harris got wind of my activities against the proposal and has invited the entire board to a fishing party at the lower dam. They are having a high time, well guarded. I daren't leave town to see you for fear of missing a chance to get at them when he is not there.

"Troubles never come singly. Pontiac Power has bought Grainger out. Your mortgage is due this month and I am

trying to get him to renew it himself before he leaves town with his wife, who is sick.

"There is no use playing ostrich because a storm is coming. Keep a stiff upper lip and get *mad*! If we keep mad enough, we can weather this crisis and we know nothing worse can happen.— Yours to the last ditch, H. B."

Taylor looked up, brows gathered, eyes reflecting the bewilderment that had come over him.

"— nothing worse can happen," he quoted, looking again at the page.

She began to speak, but he could not hear her.

Nothing worse could happen! Ah, the chincanery of Jim Harris, the scheming of these backwoods politicians, the misfortune of having her mortgage in unsympathetic hands were inconsequential details compared to what he had to tell her.

Her words swam into his consciousness:

"— so I've thought all along it was something to meet — later. I might have known that they wouldn't delay, that it would come now, not next month, not next year — but somehow," spreading her hands "I haven't had the courage to bring it close and tell myself that the danger was here — and real. I've grown a little tired like my father grew tired; I've had a lot to meet — and now this comes —"

Her eyes were very wide as she looked into his and shook her head slowly; her chin trembled.

"And this other — if I can't renew that mortgage —" with a helpless lift of one hand. "Twenty thousand dollars! I couldn't raise a thousand! And my father's work — our hopes — oh, I feel so much alone!"

Her arms were half extended as she stopped. She

averted her face, and for a moment Taylor stood there stunned. She was broken by what Bryant had written her—and if he should tell what he had come to tell? That would be cruelty now, he told himself; it would be sheer heartlessness not to spare her further suffering for a few hours at least—and while he waited, helpless to help her, he saw her clutch her fists and a low moan escaped her lips.

The sound was like the bite of a lash and he stepped forward, reached out his hands, checked the gesture and left them hovering over her shoulders. For an instant he was so and then drew back, afraid to touch her, lost, knowing no word to say, no move to make; but a ragged breath caught in her throat and he found his palms on her arms, gripping roughly, turning her about, and the feel of her flesh under his fingers clarified everything.

"Helen!" he cried. "Helen! you're not alone! I'm here, with you. I'm going to stay. I'm going to help you!"

She looked up in wonder at the manner of his voice. He had spoken no boast, no empty promise; there was a modesty, a simplicity about him which indicated strength, ability, earnestness, and she read those qualities in his face. For the first time she saw maturity there, for the first time she was almost in awe of him.

She felt his hands gripping her arms. She felt herself drawn forward, close and closer to him, and put out her hands, not to hold her body away, but to place them against his breast, pressing her finger tips into his flesh. Her lips were parted, breath light and quick. She felt his arms go about her almost roughly, saw his face darken and heard his voice, thick and husked with passion:

"I won't let them harm you!" he said tensely. "I'll stand by you. I don't know much — yet; I'm young, but I'm strong and with you to fight for — I can do anything!"

He trembled. She was there in his arms, submissive, her hands were against his body in a strange caress and he felt her limbs touching his, warm and firm. He closed his eyes and shook his head as though fearful that this would not endure a moment of sightlessness; but she was there when he opened them. This was real; this was no vagary of his distressed mind — and he laughed.

That laugh roused Helen and she drew back, breaking his embrace slowly, staring at him as though this that he had done frightened her.

"John!" she said under her breath. "John? What is — this?"

She backed away.

"Don't you know?" he muttered. She did not speak, and he advanced slowly until he was looking down into her uplifted face. "Don't you know?" She did not answer and he took one of her wrists in his hand savagely. "Helen! Don't you know — now!"

Her breath was driven from her lungs as he wrapped his arms about her fiercely, and that breath, escaping through lips and nostrils, was hot on his cheek as it lowered to hers — as hot as his lips on her mouth.

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back.

"Yes — I know — now," she whispered.

Her eyes opened and looked into his; for a long moment their gazes clung, and in that look was an understanding which made words both inadequate and unnecessary. But words followed. In low voices, in broken sentences, rising in tone and with fewer pauses.

"And you came — when I needed you so!" she said in a thin, strained voice. "I need you, John. I'm going — to depend on you — so much — so much." He tried to hold her even closer, but she took her arms from about his neck and drew away, backing toward the door. "I need you so badly — and I've needed you for so long — I guess — that I can't have you near me tonight John — not tonight — not this night."

He followed impulsively to the door, but it closed in his face.

"Please! Please!" he heard her say through it. He made no move. The sound of her steps died away. He stood alone in the room, hands at his side opening and closing slowly.

And in the darkness outside, Milt Goddard who had spied and seen all, fingered the bit of the axe he had taken from the woodpile.

Taylor started across the room to the door and Goddard crouched and crept forward — and stopped. John opened the screen.

The axe dropped from the other's hands, he moved away, putting the great trunk of Watch Pine between himself and Taylor. Then he turned and stumbled into the night, muttering:

"I ain't got the nerve — I ain't got th' nerve to kill him!"

CHAPTER XIX

IN such a manner, happiness was born of turmoil.

Helen Foraker had taken young Taylor into her hands and unconsciously moulded him into the man she would have; he had grown, he had changed, and though he had yet to prove his mettle, he bore rich promise. And when he came in her darkest hour and pledged his strength in her cause she found that she needed the things a man so moulded, could give. Not his help, first, but his love, his trust, the sanctuary of his arms.

But Taylor held that secret which he dared not tell the girl and even that night while the glory of her yielded lips was still fever in his blood he felt the mounting of apprehension, much like the misgiving which had been born that night in Florida when his father made his gift of logs, when Philip Rowe had smirked. He went to sleep, memory of her hands about his neck mingling with his father's face leering at his efforts to protect the forest from a destroying force.

"I felt so secure last night," she told him in the early day. "I felt that Jim Harris — no one, can hurt me now. I told you once that there were impulses in my heart that never had a chance to grow. This one, John, is the strongest of them; it has been held back more than any other; repression gave it strength. Its breaking free was so sudden, so overwhelming — I didn't dare stay — last night."

She put her face against his shoulder.

There had been no restraint, no shyness in her greeting

He had her in his arms when she spoke and she could feel him tremble at her words, but before he could reply they heard Black Joe grumble at Pauguk as he came around the corner of the house.

Joe came up the steps and gave his curt little bob.

"Say, Helen, will you tell her that th' boys at th' mill found a bee tree and if she wants any honey I cattalate she'd better send the kids down with a bucket."

"Yes, Joe; I will tell her."

The woodsman went and she moved close to Taylor again.

"It's funny, but it's heart breaking," she said. "That is what misunderstanding will do. For twenty years they haven't spoken, and they loved twenty years ago. A misunderstanding came, and probably they've both forgotten what it was now. Stubbornness has kept them apart and made them both sour. My father said that Aunt May used to be the gayest girl on the Blueberry and that Black Joe always sang at his work. Their quarrel came and they have not spoken since. Each is only holding out for the other to break the silence and growing more bitter and older, Aunt May trying to make another woman's children ease her heartache, Joe hiding the hurt under his crustiness and living only for the nursery."

"We can't ever risk a misunderstanding, can we?"

She looked at him closely.

"Why, John, what is it?" startled.

"What is what?"

"You look so — so *strange!*"

He was conscious that he was flushing; flushing because the thing he kept from Helen for her own peace of mind was a splendid nucleus for misunderstanding. But she was on her way to Pancake, even then, to learn more of the

menaces which hung over the forest. He could not tell her now. Tonight, he told himself, tonight he would give her the whole miserable story. So he laughed her startled question away and watched her drive down the road.

It was night when she returned, mouth set and eyes serious.

"It looks dark," she said hoarsely in answer to his question. "Darker than ever. All last night and all today Humphrey Bryant has tried to get in touch with the different supervisors, but Jim Harris has them all down at the big dam where they can't be reached. Harris has heard that Humphrey was trying to block his game and fixed so we couldn't get to any of the board until it meets — and then Harris will be there, and he holds them in the hollow of his hand.

"If he could be locked up, driven away from that meeting long enough for Humphrey to get at them! He has something up his sleeve, some little thing, such a faint hope that he won't even confide in me! All he asks is ten minutes alone with the board, and he might as well ask for help from Harris!"

It was later in the evening that Taylor walked aimlessly toward the nursery. He had not seen Black Joe there and was almost on the humped figure which prodded in a seed bed before he noticed the old fellow. Joe looked up, gave a contemptuous sniff and began gathering his few implements, for it was nearly dark. He went off toward the men's shanty without again looking at Taylor.

John walked on and stood looking absently down the rows of transplants a few moments and then retraced his steps until a movement in the ground attracted him. He watched and saw the stirring of a mole as it made slow

progress. It went beneath the path and entered a seed bed, where stood pine trees no higher than a man's finger is long. Taylor watched the tiny trees heaving before the disturbance, saw their hair-like roots break through the loam. He removed his pipe and looked toward the shanty for Joe.

"By Jove!" he muttered. "That'll hurt 'em."

He walked quickly out of the nursery.

Joe was on the deacon bench, filling his pipe. Two of the men were with him and Taylor knew that the woodsman was settling himself for a yarn. He hesitated as Joe looked at him with indifference, but he went on down the room and stopped by the group.

"I was in the nursery, Joe," he said, "and I saw something you might want to know." The older man crammed the Peerless into his pipe-bowl and glared up at the intruder. "There's a mole in one of the seed beds and —"

No chance to finish! With a snort of alarm Joe was on his feet, hurrying toward the door.

"Come on," he snapped, when John did not follow. "Show me where!"

Taylor followed at a trot as Joe hastened across the open space and in the dusk searched for the telltale welt in the soft earth.

"There! See?"

Joe had seen the welt and the disturbed trees and he commenced to curse, steadily, frightfully, as he floundered about in the darkness.

"Cut back to th' shanty an' git somethin'!" he snapped. "Somethin' to make a widder mole — 'n axe or anythin' — cut an' run for it!"

Taylor cut and ran, passing the two who had been with

Joe inside and who had followed leisurely. A broad-axe was within the door, the first implement John saw; he seized it and ran back.

Then followed a tense interval with Joe, axe upraised, stooping over the seed bed, watching in the growing darkness for the movement which would betray the intruder's presence. He muttered and gave no heed to the others. John kept close by him, also on the watch for the movement in the soil and once Joe pushed him aside as they both groped over the same area.

"Git away," he complained, "or you'll git hurted along with this here blind devil!"

John stood back, then, but he did not go away. The other two sauntered away, uninterested in the affair which had aroused Joe to such excitement. The old fellow kept up his vigilance, axe ready to strike, muttering to himself, until it was no longer possible to see.

Then he straightened and looked about, saw Taylor and grunted.

"Damn him to hot hell!" he whispered. "He'll ruin this here bed if he gits a chanct!"

It was the closest to a friendly comment he had ever made to the other and John moved closer.

"Sh!" Joe warned. "Keep still! He's here some'eres an' we got to watch. You git a lantern; I'll stand guard."

John returned to the shanty and came back with the lighted lantern. Again they searched, but without result, and then Joe directed John to follow the mole's trail to the boundary of the nursery and tramp it down carefully, while he kept up his vigilant watch, eyes bright, head moving constantly as, stooped above the bed, he still searched for movement.

Fifteen minutes passed, a half hour; no more indication of the mole.

"He's here yet," Joe whispered. "We gotta wait. Here gimme, that lantern."

Joe placed it on the ground so they could see. Then he lowered his axe and stood by, relaxing for the first time. Taylor had been partly amused by this performance, but as he saw the seriousness with which Joe confronted this comparatively trivial damage to his seedlings his interest was thoroughly aroused.

"I reckon mebby we could set down," Joe whispered and dragged a cracker box toward the lantern. "We'll watch an' we'll sure slay him, th' first move he makes!"

In his plan he was including Taylor, on whom he had always looked with scorn!

John settled himself with a fresh pipe, and Joe sat beside him, silent, eyes on the damaged bed, axe in his hands. Twice he started up sharply; once he rose and stood crouched over the place, axe upraised, ready to strike, holding his breath; then sank to the box with a muttered curse.

He looked at Taylor closely, for a long moment; then down at the axe, and something like chagrin flickered in his eyes.

"Anybody who didn't have good sense 'uld think a feller was crazy to carry on like this," he said, straightening a leg, and again looking at the mighty weapon with which he had planned to kill the small rodent, "but these here seed was special selected an' we can't let no damned mole spoil our work."

John sensed that Joe feared he might be making himself absurd and wanted to avoid that impression at any cost.

"That's right," he said lowly, "We'll get him."

Joe spit and nodded.

"Damn bet! We'll set here all night, but we'll git him."

Spit. Silence. Voices from the shanty.

"Course with ordinary seedlin's a man wouldn't set out all night," he went on after a bit, "but these here's different — special select; somethin' me an' Foraker started long time ago an' me an' Helen's been keepin' up."

John watched him; Joe was talking without being urged, without much reserve, after those weeks of aloof scorn.

"Y'see," gesturing with his paper of tobacco, "I took these here seeds from trees that was naterally whoopin' er up, growin' like weeds. Me an' Foraker 'nd Helen, now, thinks mebby we c'n work trees like the gov'm't works wheat an' corn; git th' seed from the best stock; improve your —"

He stooped and leaned forward, rising slowly to a crouch, spitting on a palm as he grasped his axe; then sank back again with a quiet oath of disappointment.

"That sounds reasonable," said John and nodded.

Joe looked at him sharply, as though suspecting that Taylor was skeptical, but he saw the genuine regard for his idea in the younger man's face and looked away and sighed with satisfaction.

"I *thought* mebby you had a *little* sense," he said.

Taylor smiled and buttoned his coat.

"You can't do much in a short time, though, can you?" he asked.

"Twenty years, mebby; mebby more. Foraker used to say a lifetime." Shrug. Spit. "Me 'nd Helen 'nd him are th' only ones — besides the professors — who've got sense enough to git intrusted."

"Maybe you'll let me in on that, Joe. I'm interested. There are so darned many big things going on around here that a greenhorn can't show interest in them all at once — where'd you find the seed bearers you wanted?"

Joe told him at length, told of their experiences, the data they had assembled, warming to his subject, all but forgetting the mole. He no longer looked away from Taylor, but peered closely into his face and answered questions and talked — and talked — and talked.

For years he had worked in that nursery, tending his seedlings as he would so many children, talking to few but Helen and her father about his work, finding none but them and professional foresters who were interested in what he was doing. He found a pride in these accomplishments and was hungry for appreciation; he could talk to the men of the crew about logging, could tell his Bunion tales and find an interested audience. But for the matters closest to his heart there was no outlet — until now, when this city boy sat beside him on a cracker box, watching for a mole, listening, unafraid to betray ignorance by questions —

Lights went out in the shanty; sounds of men ceased. The moon came up and still the two sat, collars up, for the night was cool, whispering, watching the seed bed for the stirring that would end their vigil —

And then Joe talked of the forest, what it had been, what it was and might be; of Foraker himself and of Helen —

Men can say worlds about women with the use of a few simple words.

"She's a good girl," Joe said of Helen Foraker, without much emphasis, with only a slight nod of his head, but in

that sentence was an indication of devotion and loyalty that could not be mistaken. "She's —

"Look there!"

His whisper was the barest breath. They rose together, creeping toward the lantern. There was no wind, their movements were of the lightest, but in the center of the bed was a stirring, a heaving among the little trees —

The axe rose slowly; it poised, and then it swept down and buried itself in the ground —

"Got him!" cried Joe. "Got him!" as he turned back the earth with the blade.

He grinned then and spit in delight and repeated again and again that he had "got him."

Carefully he made temporary repairs to the damage in the bed and then picked up the lantern.

"Now we'll hit th' bunks, Johnny," he chuckled. "A good night's work, lad!"

They walked slowly toward the men's shanty, shoulder to shoulder, like old friends. Before the door they stopped and Taylor said:

"There's one thing I want to put up to you, Joe. You're the only man I can go to with it and it's about — Helen."

"Helen?"

"Yes."

"You'd do a lot for her, wouldn't you, Black Joe?"

"Who? Me? Dyin' would be easy — for her!"

He went on haltingly to extoll the girl's virtues and Taylor smoked thoughtfully, some of the perplexity that had been in his gathered brows even during that successful venture into a new friendship departing, a strange sort of twinkle in his eyes, and when Joe stopped Taylor looked

about to see that they were unobserved and lowered his voice and talked; and Joe nodded and grunted and once he cursed heavily, forbiddingly.

Joe began to question — to plan in whispers.

"Sure, I know! I allus watch 'em as I don't like. I know his habits — he's chased after me — chased — an' I wouldn't talk to him — not before —"

He laughed silently.

CHAPTER XX

SATURDAY was a lazy June day; there was little breeze, little movement of any sort and blue-bottle flies droned through the open door of the office of the *Blueberry Banner*. Humphrey Bryant sat in his chair, arms hanging limply from his shoulders, one foot resting on its side, the other leg sprawled before him.

It was nearly noon. All day yesterday, all the night before he had worked to batter down the defense that Jim Harris had built about the individuals of his board of supervisors — *his* by right of possession. It had availed nothing. Bryant had watched them come into town, watched them gather at the court house and he could see them now, in the upper corner of the red building, moving about as they got at the work before them —

That he could see, and something else, the feet of Jim Harris, propped against the window sill, as he tilted his chair backward and let the machinery of legislation grind its way — the way he had directed. Those feet rested idly enough, lazily enough, but Bryant knew that they were ready to stamp down upon any challenge that might be flaunted, that Harris would not leave that meeting until the motion to adjourn had carried, that it was such vigilance that had made him valuable to Pontiac Power, and a menace to honest men.

And the old editor was slumped listlessly in his chair, riffling the pages of that worn note book because he was

an old man, and a shrewd old man; being old, he had lost his best vigor; being shrewd he did not deceive himself. His heart did not falter and he tried to see clearly, but he read in those contented feet a barrier against which any javelin he might hurl in the cause of right would crumple and fall.

The morning freight came down and John Taylor and Black Joe, who had swung aboard at Seven Mile, dropped off and walked up First Street, Taylor looked into the *Banner* office.

"Have dinner with us?" he asked.

"No thanks, Taylor. Chained to the desk today."

There was no laugh in the blue eyes and they did not rest long on Taylor's face. They were fixed on those feet in that court house window.

John and Black Joe went on.

"Chained to his desk," Black Joe muttered and laughed, "An' his eyes glued on that damn tin court house!"

They entered the poolroom. It was a dingy, smelly place, with two battered tables on a littered floor that still bore the faint marks of river boots. The cigar case was fly specked and broken and patched. There was a dusty one-eyed deer on the wall beside a lithograph of a fat-legged girl in red stockings, and a dirty-faced clock. A stuffed owl stared fixedly from the opposite wall and there was a faded photograph of the Blueberry, jammed with pine logs over which rivermen posed self-consciously.

Joe eyed the stock of cigars.

"What seegar is it Jim Harris smokes?" he asked.

"He give me one onct —"

"This one, Joe," the greasy-faced proprietor said.

"Fifteen centers. Good stuff, that; none better. Jim

always buys here," proudly. "Comes in after every meal, regular as a clock."

"That so? Always comes here, eh?"

"Yup. Says I know how to keep tobacco, an' Jim sure ought to know."

"He sure ought," said Joe, putting the cigar in his pocket and bringing out his pipe and Peerless.

The two retired to a bench in the window and talked, heads close together.

Noon. Movement on the court house steps as the board adjourned for dinner and trooped together to the Commercial House to eat with Jim and on Jim.

Harris was in fine feather. This morning the resolutions had been drawn as he had planned and this afternoon the board would pass them, as he had planned. Within sixty days the county would bond itself for a new court house which was sop to the community pride, and the roads, which would speed the settling of that waste land to the northward with more wretched families.

After the meal Harris bought cigars for the board members at the hotel desk; he did not take one for himself and when the others started back toward the court house he lumbered across the street to the poolroom, waving his hand and saying that he would be along directly.

He meant that. But he was forced to wait for attention because the proprietor sat on the wide window ledge, beside him was Lucius Kildare and on the bench facing them sat Black Joe, pipe in his hands, leaning forward, talking earnestly. John Taylor occupied the rest of the bench and another lounge leaned over the back, grinning broadly.

Black Joe's gaze was directed at the face of the poolroom

owner and he held the man's attention even after he knew that the great Jim Harris waited.

Then the proprietor broke away and Joe leaned back and puffed while Harris took a handful of cigars from the box. Silence.

"An' you never heerd tell 'bout Paul's mule team?" Joe asked Taylor.

"Never!"

Joe shook his head and clicked his tongue. "My Lord, you're igerent," he said and hitched about to face Taylor, and see Harris. He waited a moment before he commenced to talk, prefacing his tale by a moment of suspense, as is the way with the best spinners of yarns. Harris, biting off the end of his cigar, watched. There had been no unfriendly stare from Black Joe this time; there seemed to be no barrier between the woodsman and any who might be within earshot. For months Jim Harris had awaited such a moment.

He looked down the street. The last of the supervisors was disappearing within the court house. Had Joe waited another instant Jim might have gone on to join them, but Joe did not wait. He commenced to talk, slowly, deliberately. He told his story as the Bunion stories have been told for two generations in the Lake States. Those about him were schooled listeners; they knew when to inject the questions that led him into the byways of Bunion classics, knew when to laugh, when to repress their mirth until the point of the narrative should be completed.

And Jim Harris waited and listened, wanting to go, putting aside his caution from moment to moment because Black Joe was recounting the adventures of this mythical

logger and to hear any of Joe's kind and generation tell these tales is to be blessed.

This is the story that Black Joe told:

"Now, this here mule team of Paul's was a right good pair. They done a lot of work an' Paul he treated 'em right, allus cattelatin' it was best policy to be good to stock. When they was workin' hard it cost a lot to keep 'em up fer sure, but when they was just standin' in th' barn he only fed 'em four bushels of corn to th' feed.

"Paul fed 'em hisself, when he wasn't away, an' when he was gone Swede Charley looked atter 'em — along with th' ox-team, little Babe an' her mate. You heerd tell 'bout *that* team, ain't you?

"My God, Taylor, don't you know nothin'? This here was a good team, too. Never seen 'em myself, but I knowed a chore boy who worked for Paul th' winter of th' blue snow, an' *he* was a-tellin' as how little Babe was four axe-handles wide atween th' eyes —"

He spit and wiped his chin.

"One day when Paul was loggin' off section thirty-seven, he was feedin' th' mules an' he sees what looks like a good-sized kernel of corn. Might' good-sized kernel, all right. Paul, he was allus lookin' atter good things, so he stuck her in his vest pocket an' didn't give it to th' mules.

"Atter dinner he was rummagin' round fer a tooth-pick an' locates this here kernel o' corn. He was out behint th' barn jus' then an' so he kicks a hole in th' ground an' plants her —

"That was th' big barn. See, Paul he kep' a lotta teams on th' haul which meant pret' big barn. Big job, cleanin' this here barn an' Paul was great for this — now, efficiency.

So he had th' barn set on wheels an' moved it along every day, 'stead of acleanin' her out.

"That night a settler drives in to talk to Paul 'bout some cord wood. He was thar awhile an' 'long 'bout dusk he goes out fer to start home —

"In a minute he was back an' says to Paul that his team's got away.

" 'So'? says Paul, 'Where'd you leave 'em?'

" 'Out tied to that air telephone pole behint your barn,' gesturing.

" 'They ain't no telephone pole thar,' says Paul.

" 'Sure they is,' says the settler.

"So Paul goes out to investigate. He an' th' settler walks aroun' behint th' barn an' th' settler says to look thar; thar she is. Paul looks an' blinks because b' God, his corn had sprouted an' this here telephone pole was his cornstalk!

"Well, it was a pret' high cornstalk by then an' Paul leans back to look up an' see how high it was an', b' gosh, what's he see but that air team an' wagon belongin' to th' settler away up thar, most outta sight. Th' stalk had growed up an' took th' whole shebang along!

"Now Paul he knowed he's got fer to get this here team down, so he sends fer Swede Charley an' says, 'Charley, you climb up an' ontie that air team.'

"So Charley he spits on his hands an' starts up. Darn good climber, Charley; he climbs pret' darn fast, an' he gits away up thar an' then they see him makin' funny motions, wavin' his arms an' such, an' th' boys begin to wonder what's up.

"Well, Paul he figgers it out. Charley can't make it an' 's tryin' to slide down, but this gol-darn stock's

growin' up faster 'n he can slide down an' he keeps right on goin' outta sight."

He paused and pulled twice at his pipe, ignoring the mirth about him.

"Now, this 's pret' serious, thinks Paul, Swede Charley up thar an' goin' higher; what's goin' to happen to him? He'll starve, won't he?

"So Paul runs to th' cook shanty an' gits a lotta biscuits an' into th' van where he keeps his shot gun.

"Pret' good gun, this here one of Paul's. Fair-sized gun, too. Paul he used to load each bar'l with a dish pan full of powder an' brick bats an' he'd shoot her first east an' if he didn't git game thar, he'd shoot her west; allus got game one place or t'other.

"So Paul loads her with biscuits an' shoots both bar'ls up toward where Charley's went, most outta sight by then. And they knowed Charley 'd have somethin' to eat until they could git him down.

"Th' settler he walks home an' Paul he goes to bed, thinkin' 'bout that air team an' Charley. Nothin' he can do till mornin' but when mornin' comes, th' top of that stalk, th' team an' Charley is all clean outta sight —

"Paul he gits right worried. Atter a few days they commences to find dead crows in th' swamp. Crows kep' fallin' down plumb dead an' nothin' but skin an' bones. Lot o' crows. Paul he figgers that air out, too. This here team's died up thar an' th' crows has started up atter 'em for a nice meal, but they 's starved to death on th' way!"

Taylor glanced at the battered clock. It was after one.

"Now this here cornstalk gives no sign of slowin' up. She grows over ag'in' the barn an' they have fer to put

th' barn on another set o' wheels so's it'll run sideways. Then she grows ag'in' th' men's shanty an' they has to put that on wheels too, an' th' cornstalk keeps crowdin' 'em apart ontill they has to string a telephone line atween th' barn an' shanty to communicate ready-like.

"Paul he's pret' worried. Never seen nothin' like this here afore. One day a man drives into camp with a feather in his hat an' gold buttons on his coat an' solid gold medals on his chist an' gold things on his shoulders. He's got a sword an' stripes on his pants an' shiny boots an' he carried a big paper all stuck over with red sealin' wax an' blue ribbins. He walks up to Paul.

" 'You Mister Bunion?' he asks, an' Paul he 'lows how he is. 'Well I gotta warrant for your arrest from Congress,' he says.

" 'Warrant?' says Paul, surprised-like. 'From Congress? What for? An' who are you?'

" 'I'm th' Admiral of th' Navy,' says th' gent, 'An' this here cornstalk 's got its roots into Lake Huron on one side an' Lake Michigan on th' other an' she is suckin' the water up so fast that all th' boats is aground!'

"Now Paul, he ain't no mean talker, so he argufies with this here Admiral an' promises him he'll get this here cornstalk out th' way. Th' Admiral he don't want to leave it that way, but Paul he's done a lotta loggin' fer Congress, y' know, an' he stands pret' well. Yup. He logged off North Dakoty. See, when th' Governor who was a reformed Swede found out th' King o' Sweden was drivin' all th' good farmers out an' that they was comin' over here, he wants 'em in Dakoty. But they wa'n't no place for 'em, then, so th' governor gits Congress to say it'll log off th' state an' Congress gives th' contrack to Paul

an' makes good, which gives him a pret' fair stand-in —

"Well the Admiral he goes off an' Paul, he sets down to think. He's gotta cut that damn cornstalk down somehow, but it's a big job. He thinks an thinks an' then he sends for th' Tie-Cuttin' Finn an' says —

"Tie-Cuttin Finn? Never heerd tell on him?"

He clicked his tongue in disgust and sighed.

"Well this here Finn, he was th' best broad-axe man Paul ever had, but he ain't quite so good as Paul wants at that, him havin' a big tie contrack. So Paul he gits an idea. He rigs a thirty-pound broad-axe on each of th' Finn's feet like skates." He drew up a foot to illustrate. "Straps 'em on good an' solid. Then th' Finn goes into th' cedar swamp. He goes up a tree, usin' these here axes for climbers, scores goin' up, gits to th' top, slides down, hewes two faces on th' way an' knocks off a tie every eight feet —"

Taylor did not laugh with the others. He looked again at the clock. It was quarter after one.

"Well Paul, he calls in th' Tie-Cuttin' Finn an' tells him to pick out fifty of th' likeliest-lookin' broad-axe men in camp, which th' Finn does. He takes 'em into th' swamp an' fer a month he teaches 'em until he's got fifty of th' best axe-men that ever spit on a hand.

"Then one mornin' bright an' early they all come out, axes all sharp, stripped to their shirts an' lines up roun' th' cornstalk.

"Paul he gits the dinner horn from th' cook shanty — Ever hear 'bout that dinner horn? Nope? Huh! Well she's a good one. Has to have a good one y' know, 'cause he runs a big camp an' th' men git scattered a long ways by dinner time, but nobody but Paul can blow this here

horn. The sound carries all right when Paul blows her, but it's kinda expensive 'cause every time he blows he knocks down 'bout 'leven acres of standin' timber.

"Well, Paul, he gits these here men all strung 'round th' cornstalk an' he blows th' horn for 'em to start. They slam into th' stalk good an' heavy, fifty of 'em, each sinkin' his axe to th' eye — but —" He sighed and paused. "You see, their choppin' don't do a dime's worth of good, 'cause this here damn stalk grows so fast that they can't hit twice in th' same place to git a chip off."

Joe scowled and rubbed his chin.

"Bad," he muttered. "Pret' bad, with Congress waitin' fer to arrest Paul an' ruin his reppetation.

"So Paul, he does some more thinkin'. Now you recalled 'bout Paul's big saw mill. Pret' good-sized mill. Right *fair* mill. She'd cut a million feet an hour. To keep this mill in logs he had to build a pret' good railroad. Light steel wouldn't stand his trains 'cause they had to load fairly heavy, so Paul had some special steel made, mite heavier 'n anythin' they'd ever used loggin'. Each rail was a quarter-mile long an' a foot square on th' end.

"Now this road, good as she was, couldn't quite keep th' mill in logs. The' was a Scotchman engineer on th' loggin' train an' he used to roll 'em in pret' fast, but Paul he ain't satisfied, an' he laces into th' Scotchman one day an' tells it to him good an' hard an' says to put on a little steam, wood's cheap, an' travel some. That made the engineer mad — 'cause he thought he'd been doin' pret' good. So when he goes out with his empties to th' bankin' ground he opens her wide an' she goes so damn fast that th' draft picks up th' steel an' ties an' rolls 'em

up behind an' over th' way car ontill railroad, train an' everythin' 's junk.

"Now that air railroad she was Paul's first big failure; gettin' rid of this here cornstalk 's th' other. So he natterly thinks 'bout both, an' that gives him 'n idee. He goes over to this here junk pile an' commences pullin' her apart.

"Quite a job, with them quarter-mile rails, but by-an'-by he gits a few pulled loose an' straightened out an' puts 'em over his shoulder an' walks back to camp.

"That evenin' atter supper he takes a look at th' cornstalk, which is a right good-sized stalk by then. He takes these here rails an' knots 'em together, strings 'em aroun' th' stalk, ties 'em up tight in a knot an' stands back an' says: 'There, durn ye, pinch yerself off!' Which the stalk perceeds to do."

Harris relighted his cigar with a hand that trembled.

"Well she pinches all right. They can hear her crackin' over in Wisconsin.

"Then Paul he thinks to hisself, what 'll happen when she comes down?

"So he sends fer his surveyor an' puts him out 'n th' brush with his transit to watch th' top of this here cornstalk. They strings a telephone line out to th' place an' th' surveyor camps there. Th' stalk keeps growin' an' snappin' an' atter a while th' surveyor he telephones an' says she's commencin' to sag.

"Paul he sends his men out into th' clearin' to warn th' settlers an' gets 'em all outen th' way. Everybody's pret' much excited.

" 'She's commencin' to sag somethin' bad,' telephones th' surveyor. Everybody gits away back — an' looks —

They can see her quiver an' quake an' by-'n-by they can hear her top whistlin'."

He spat.

"Yes, sir, they heerd that top whistlin' four days afore she hit th' ground!"

He stopped with a nod and tightening of his lips. Harris rocked with laughter. Taylor, though, was very serious and looked again at the clock. A half hour had passed.

"Four days," repeated Joe, seriously. "An' no wonder! Why, Paul, he figgered out that about a mile 'n half of that air top had frazzeled out on th' way down!"

"They went out to look th' thing over atter she was safe down an' up pret' well toward what was left of th' top end they found 'n ear of corn. Pret' sizeable ear, this here was, and it was druv straight into th' ground by th' stalk.

"Paul he scratched his head an' thinks he better git that air ear out. So he goes gits th' mule team 'nd builds a stump puller. He has to build a pret' big stump puller all right. He rigs her up good an' strong an' hooks on th' mules an' pulls on that cob an' when he gits her up he has 'n eighty foot well, all cobbled up with kernels."

Harris leaned against the door and his eyes swam with tears as he laughed.

Joe looked at Taylor and the young man nodded — after he had glanced into the street — toward the court house. At that Black Joe got up and drew a paper of tobacco from his pocket.

"Joe, that's a good yarn," said Harris, drawing a handkerchief to wipe his eyes.

"Yup, Paul was quite a lad. He never let anythin' interfere with his work."

"More than I've done," sliding his watch to a big palm. "I'm overdue — a half hour!"

Still chuckling, making brief farewells, he departed. Joe and Taylor watched him swing along the board sidewalk. They could see the supervisors through the open window of their room — and one figure was in the street, the figure that John had seen as Joe brought his story to a finish: Humphrey Bryant, walking slowly from the court house toward the *Banner* office, slowly but not like an old man — with a spring in his stride, and his thin plume of white hair waved triumphantly above his scalp.

CHAPTER XXI

HUMPHREY BRYANT had not eaten, had not left his desk. He watched the supervisors trail toward the Commercial House with Jim Harris in the lead, watched the town merchants one by one lock their doors and go home for dinner — and then sat there, staring blankly at the picture of Pingree on the blue calcimined wall.

He was not conscious that so much time passed. Time seemed to speed that day, drawing events after it in a dizzying swirl, portentous events, carrying great consequence for him and Helen Foraker beneath their surface, and he roused with a start as Sim Burns strolled along the walk on his way back from dinner. Wes Hubbard was behind him and Art Billings and the others. Finally Henry Wales, fretting with his pale cigar, hastened along as the clock on Bryant's office wall struck one.

The old man rose and went to the door. Through the open court house window he saw the supervisors moving about their room — he watched and waited. Jim Harris did not emerge from the poolroom.

Bareheaded he crossed the street, breath a trifle short, heart thumping.

The aimless chatter of the group frazzled to a tell-tale silence as the editor appeared in the doorway. He stood a moment, counting them. Each township was represented. He stepped inside, drawing the door shut behind him and stood with his hand on the knob. His white,

stiff-bosomed shirt was open at the throat, his vest unbuttoned.

"Gentlemen," he said, and bowed.

They were all old men, except Sim; some white headed, some grizzled; some withered, a few portly; of the old order in body and thought.

Wes Hubbard took his feet from the chairman's desk.

"Mornin' Hump'," he said and picked up the gavel.

"Lookin' for a piece for th' *Banner*?"

There was something malicious in the casual question.

"Yes, for the *Banner* — perhaps."

"Ought to make a good write-up. We're goin' to resolute for a new court house an' for lots of roads this afternoon."

"That's commendable. We've managed to stagger along with the old tin shack and our sand trails for quite a while.

"You think, do you gentlemen, that the electorate will vote the bonds?"

"Sure thing!" It was Sim Burns, rather defensive in his manner. "Why shouldn't they?"

The editor shrugged. His blue eyes were very bright, but unsmiling; very quick in their darting from face to face, but not shifting — just prying, roving, alive and alert.

"There's only one thing to stand in the way," he said, "Taxes."

Wes Hubbard rose.

"I guess that th' people understand pretty well that th' country's goin' to be better fixed for funds."

"That's why I came over, gentlemen, to ask, as a representative of the press, about the revised assessments."

There was a stir in the group; men drew closer together.

"That'll come out when th' boards of review meet."

"And maybe it'll come out sooner!" There was a snap to the old editor's voice; he moved a step nearer the faces which had slowly formed in a group before him. The attitudes of lounging had given way to a tensity — like the tensity of his own manner. "I want to know who's going to pay the bill."

Some one coughed. Henry Wales sniffed and eyed his cigar.

"That's all fixed, Hump," Hubbard said. "There won't be any hardship for anybody that ain't got it comin'."

"Let's understand one another, gentlemen. Let's get down to brass tacks. I understand that the valuation on Foraker's Folly is to be raised until the sum realized will pay interest and create sinking funds for all these bonds."

Sim Burns snapped: "No more 'n fair! No more 'n legal; I've only followed the law in makin' my assessment."

The editor's blue eye whipped to him. "Only followed what law?"

"State tax law," color mounting, lower lip drooping. "You stood by Foraker; you stood by his girl. You believed they could grow timber out there an' they have. Now do you want to stand between 'em an' th' bill for that privilege? Want to be a party to defrauding the people of this county out of their just tax income?"

There was menace in him as he stepped forward, fists half clenched. Others glanced at him as though his challenge gave them assurance.

"You, Burns, and all of you know my attitude on the matter of taxing timber. There's no need of discussing that. I'm here to discuss a matter of justice."

"Justice!" scoffed Sim. "Justice? You think it's fair for a big rich property like that to get out of paying its share?"

"I think it is illegal for any large interest to shirk its share of public expense. I think it is criminal for tax officers to aid and abet any interest in avoiding its just burden. That is why I have come—on a matter of justice."

He moved forward again and drew his pudgy figure up. His face was flushed, his eyes flashing cold fire. He seemed to grow in stature as his voice mounted. The old man poised there, face to face with Burns, and then let his gaze travel the group, as though finished with the one man. The silence was acute. A fly, bumping against the window, sounded large in it. There was portent in the gesture of Bryant's half-lifted hand.

He relaxed suddenly, and a smile ran down into his beard.

"Understand me, gentlemen, I came not as a trouble maker, not as a kicker against improvements, but on a simple matter of simple justice. The people of this country understand your plan thoroughly. Foraker's Folly is to pay the bill for these improvements. Chief Pontiac Power and Jim Harris are to benefit by them directly, and the people are to benefit by boasting a new public building.

"I want to call your attention to this fact; Chief Pontiac Power, all its holdings, its three dams, its three power plants, its flowage rights, its unused key positions, its monopoly of the power possibilities in this country, its subsidiary, the Harris Development Company, is assessed at a valuation of two hundred thousand."

He paused and his eyes sought the face of Art Billings

which had paled suddenly and who seemed to shrink from Bryant's scrutiny.

"I haven't heard you making a noise about raising the assessment of Chief Pontiac in your township to a cash-value basis, Art!"

Even the fly was silent.

The blue eyes swept the faces again and the editor's voice rose a bit, not quite steady, as he strove to hold his anger down.

"I haven't heard any of you objecting to the low assessment of this corporation, which, as any of us know, will run over six million dollars cash value! More, *market* value! I've heard a mighty roar against Foraker's Folly; I haven't heard a whisper against Chief Pontiac — I'm not going to discuss this; I'm not going to ask you why?" a ripple of relief ran over the group. "I'm going to tell you why!"

His voice had leaped to a roar and his hand went quickly to his pocket, bringing forth the worn notebook. The silence was painful as he drew down his spectacles from his forehead and fumbled the pages.

"I have here memoranda which interests me, and will interest you, and will interest perhaps — perhaps, the electorate, perhaps the tax commission, perhaps the prosecuting attorney of this county if properly urged by the governor of our great state."

He looked into the book.

"I read at random: At the top of the page, I find this date: January 4, 1915. Below is written the name of Oliver Burns, uncle of the present supervisor from Lincoln township, veteran member of this body until his death. In the next column is written the time, 1.32 P.M.; which

means at that moment he entered the Commercial House and ascended the stairs to the room of Jim Harris, local representative of a great corporation." He paused, for his throat had tightened. He looked about almost fiercely but the amazement in those faces gave him strength.

"I turn the pages. The date is August 9, 1917. The first name is again Oliver Burns; the hour is 9.16 a.m. and he went up to the same place, up the same stairs to the same room, still occupied by Jim Harris, local representative of Chief Pontiac Power.

"The next notation is 9.47 a.m. and the name opposite is Wes Hubbard; the next is twenty minutes to eleven and the name is Art Billings. The next was Oren Culman at eleven four, and so on.

"Try another page: March 5, 1918. Art Billings was early, at 8.22. Until after eleven Mr. Harris had no callers, but he remained in his room waiting, looking through the window now and then. At three minutes past eleven Wes Hubbard went up the stairs, at 11.22 Oliver Burns, and at one minute to noon, Oren Culman.

"And so on, with little change, until April 6, 1920 when a new name appears: that of Sim Burns."

He stopped, jaw trembling.

"You are all there, gentlemen, on every page —"

Those who watched thought that the quivering of his jaw and the tremor in his voice was the unsteadiness of righteous wrath; but it was not that, not by far. It was misgiving. Like a stud-poker player he let them look at the high cards which lay face up — but the one in the hole — the one on which he was risking his stack, was an unknown quantity to him — and for all he knew it might be a marked card and recognizable to these men.

Slowly he closed the book and stood with it between his palms. No word of reply came for an instant and then Sim Burns spoke.

"You've mentioned my uncle's name." His voice was thin. "You'd accuse the dead of takin' Chief Pontiac's money? You'd slander the dead?"

The editor's heart pelted at his ribs. He had wrung it from them!

"The dead? Aye, the dead! And the living, equally smirched, will stand for it!" he cried, and his hand clutching the notebook' lashed out in a furious gesture as he stepped backward to fling open the door.

"Two columns of these notes I've read, gentlemen. Do you want me to read the third? Do you want me to shout down these halls the exact value of your thirty pieces of silver? The price that Chief Pontiac has paid and that you have accepted so the people of this country might be defrauded to help a great corporation?"

A movement, sharp and quick and certain as Wes Hubbard skipped from the chairman's platform.

"Shut up, Bryant!" he panted. "Hold your mouth!"

His voice was husky and he trembled as he backed against the door to close it.

The old man did not look at him. He pushed his spectacles upward and his eyes firm, assured and penetrating, ran from face to face slowly before he turned to look at the chairman who stood there, pale and shrunken.

"If I don't choose to shut up? What then?"

"I'll — we'll —," stammered Hubbard, floundering for a threat.

"You'll go, every last one of you, to a larger, finer building than this; but it's a tighter building, more

imposing than any your bonds would have built; and as for roads — you may build them with your hands, you blackguards!”

The epithet popped from his lips and he moved forward. This brought him in line with the window and from the poolroom he saw Jim Harris emerge, hat back, face red with laughter.

“We understand one another,” he said, halting. “I came on an errand of justice. I am leaving now. If Chief Pontiac wants to bear its equitable share of taxation for the fruits that it will enjoy, I have no argument. Chief Pontiac Power does not want to be fair, gentlemen. You’ve put yourself in the hands of rascals. I wrote these resolutions this afternoon that mean the ruin of Foraker’s Folly — and,” he gave the notebook just the suggestion of a brandish.

“Otherwise, the matter of the value of your pieces of silver — may wait.”

He went from the room with no further word and his feet echoed on the light boards of the stairway as he descended. Until he was gone from the building, no man stirred.

“Here comes Jim,” rasped Art Billings.

“I move we adjourn!” This in a whisper from Sim Burns.

“You can’t adjourn; we ain’t been called to order,” mumbled Hubbard.

“To hell with that!” cried Sim. “He’s got it on us, th’ old basterd! Do you all want to rot in jail? Clear out before Harris gets here or you’ll be hoppin’ from the fryin’ pan into th’ coals!”

They went with a thundering of feet down the stairway and scattered in the dusty thoroughfare of Pancake.

Jim Harris stopped and watched them go.

"All through?" he asked Henry Wales.

"Through — er — you see, Jim — "

Briefly and nervously the landlord told his guest the story, and Harris' face darkened. He made no threats then, for he knew that like mercy, corruption touches him who gives and him who receives. He stood still, gazing blankly at the office of the *Blueberry Banner*.

Hump Bryant was at the telephone, tongue roving his lip, eyes smiling happily as he listened to the glad response of Helen Foraker.

"How'd it happen?" he asked. "Lord knows — I guess He had a hand in it, my dear — "

CHAPTER XXII

TAYLOR and Black Joe were back in the forest by late afternoon. Helen was gone.

They went first to the men's shanty where Joe removed the worn and shabby suit he kept for such a rare event as a trip to Pancake and was struggling into overalls and a work shirt when John, importuned by Bobby to come and fix his see-saw, started toward the big house. Joe paused in his dressing.

"Say!" John stopped. Joe cleared his throat unnecessarily. "Tell her," he growled, "that I went to town an' that I'm back."

His voice was gruffer than ever, but John smiled as he walked away. Joe, who would not even speak to the sour Aunty May, sending her this trivial message of his well being!

He busied himself with the board and horse which made the children's teeter and saw Aunty May come to the door, mixing bowl on her hip, and glance at the children briefly, and look at length toward the men's shanty. She did this again and a third time; on her next appearance she came outside.

"Helen went to town," she volunteered.

"Yes?"

"Hump Bryant telephoned some news that made her glad. She's gone to bring him out for Sunday with the children. They don't see their Grandpa Humpy much."

Taylor worked on. "You've been away most all day," she said. He had, he admitted. "Your logs most cut?" They were. "I s'pose you have to go to town a lot, now." Yes, he had been in today.

She talked with the manner of one whose mind is not just on what she says, and her eyes went from time to time to the men's shanty.

"That's one advantage of bein' an ornery man. You c'n pick up an' git out when you will." Taylor remonstrated that men, at times, had obligations. "But when you're free you gen'ally can find some one to bum with — Now a woman, she don't like to go to town alone."

And so on, edging close to the question which was uppermost in her mind, inspecting Taylor's work with an interest that was obviously assumed. John, watching, finally said:

"We were lucky today. Caught the down freight and got a ride back to Seven Mile with Dr. Pelly."

"Oh, so you didn't go alone?"

"No, Joe and I went in."

"An' three of you rode in that one-seated car of the doctor's?"

"Plenty of room. Yes we all came back —"

Forthwith, she departed for the kitchen with the alacrity of relief and Taylor chuckled. He heard her singing a doleful hymn in a terrible contralto.

Both funny and heartbreaking, it was, as Helen had said. Sour Aunty May, crusty Black Joe; they would not speak, but the first thought of each was for the other's welfare.

Humphrey Bryant came back with Helen that night and John joined them and listened to the old editor's

modest recital of what had taken place in the court house. He saw Helen's relief, detected the justified pride that the old man took in thwarting Harris' carefully conceived plan. He listened, smiling, on the verge of telling the part he had played and which no one knew but Black Joe — the most important part in that day's victory — when Helen checked her laughter and sighed.

"It's only the skirmish. The real fight is to come."

And then they talked seriously of what awaited their wits and courage. Again Taylor detected that unyielding temper in the girl, stirred against any man or influence that menaced her forest. It was, tonight, as though Jim Harris and the others sought her very life; she planned and talked that tensely.

Ezam Grainger had gone, the new bank cashier, one young Wilcox, had arrived the day before. Ezam's mind had been so taken up with his wife's trouble that he had no time for the troubles of others. He had been sorry, but he could do nothing for Helen himself surely, he thought, the new man would renew the mortgage; perhaps later he might aid himself, if help were still needed.

But that day Helen Foraker's chief ally had defied Pontiac Power and the corporation would go out of its way not at all to help carry on the dream of eternal pine. Humphrey was going down state the first of the week to hunt an investor. Outwardly he was optimistic, but he could not cover his misgiving and when Helen indicated the headlines in a Detroit paper heralding the sharp credit stringency, his pleasant assurance lost its ring entirely.

They talked for a long time and when Taylor went out

Helen followed him down the steps. Bryant's eyes followed, too, with a smile not untouched by sadness.

Sunday.

The children, one at either hand, drew Grandpa Humpy away to inspect a nest of hatching chicks and John, beside Helen, strolled down the river to sit on the bank and finally stretch out beside her on the needles and stare up into the pine crowns and talk — rather constrainedly.

Last night he had intended to tell her of his father's plan; he had put it off because of lack of opportunity. This morning the flush of yesterday's victory died before other grave problems. She had troubles enough; tonight he would talk to Rowe. Tomorrow would do — and perhaps tonight's interview would yield the hope that this obstacle need not be faced — such was the easier way!

There was their moment of love making when half reclining on the sweet needles he held her close to him and felt her hand stroking his head and heard her say that she needed him, that big as the forest was in her reason for living it would be small, now, without this other thing which had come into her heart. He wanted to blurt out his story of yesterday, of how he had held Jim Harris and opened the way for Humphrey's strategy, but he was not given to boasting; he was reticent; better to wait with his tales of allegiance until he could be sure that his unthinking enthusiasm, his desire to help her, had not brought her face to face with an unbeatable enemy.

They went back together, his elbow touching her side.

Goddard, on lookout in Watch Pine — for the fair days had dried the country and distant brush fires sent up wraiths of pale smoke — saw them come as he had seen them go. His hand clutched the battered field glasses and his knee against the rail of the crow's nest trembled.

Philip Rowe had arrived that morning and was in his room at dusk when John's knuckles fell on the door. He received his caller, deferential, suave, courteous, but now there was open irony in his manner and voice as he bade Taylor be seated beside the table which was littered with reports that Tolman had made, for the cruiser had gone back to the forest after that telephone conversation with old Luke and covered its most remote parts thoroughly.

No words were bandied this time. Taylor came to the point at once.

"Evidently I started the thing that I was trying to make impossible."

Rowe shrugged and smoked deliberately.

"Your father never did fancy long-time investments; and he's a bit touchy on any matter of conservation. It doesn't sound practical to him."

"Did you tell him what I told you about the work that this pine represents, about the fact that a girl has been carrying the load alone?"

He put that question sharply and Rowe's gaze locked with his; the lip over his cigar moved slightly.

"I told him everything you said, Taylor," defensively. "Are you thinking that I deliberately caused trouble between you and your father?"

There was bravado in that question, a show of fearless frankness, which did not sound real. Quickly Taylor

reflected; Rowe had been close to his father and Marcia Murray more than once intimated that his position might be dangerous. Memory of those hints stirred dormant suspicion and as he looked into the glitter of the eyes that clung to his John believed that he had grounds for that misgiving.

"No I don't think that, yet, Rowe."

"Meaning that you think that you *will* think it!" laughing.

"Perhaps."

Rowe laughed again.

"There's no need of your losing your temper because you made your father lose his," he said. "You've a good opportunity here yet. You and your father don't think alike on a great many things; there's no point on which you could differ any more than on this pine deal. No use trying to impress you with his appetite for Michigan pine. You understand that as well as I do. Perhaps there is one thing about him you don't realize and that is that when it comes to a deal involving something he wants and which somebody else wants, too, he's a steam roller! He has the money, he has the determination, and he has — damned little regard for what other people want.

"He wants this pine. We've looked it over carefully, not only the timber but its backing. That backing is damned shaky. Taylor, I understand there was a little inside political excitement yesterday and Miss Foraker won. Well, that's only a stop-gap. These fellows have the law with them and in the end, which isn't very far away, they'll get her.

"There's another thing. This bank holds a mortgage for twenty thousand on a part of the forest and there's

no chance of their renewing it. She can't get the money anywhere else unless she's got better credit than most of us, and the foreclosure will pretty well upset her scheme for logging as you outlined it the other day. And there are other things, several —" He paused and eyed his cigar. "You've never liked me very well, Taylor; I've known it. I'm now in a position to make you or break you as far as your future with your father is concerned. I have full authority to act for him on this matter and if you doubt it, try to get in touch with him either by telephone or by a trip home." He paused to let that sink in.

"I don't want to do anything that's unfair." He eyed the tendril of cigar smoke. Some one entered the next room. Muffled voices, which neither of them heeded. "If you want to come in on this deal with us, see it from your father's way and help, it may do a lot to re-establish you in his favor. Just now, you're not worth a white chip. He has a pretty good reason to believe, too, that you're somewhat prejudiced by your interest in Miss Foraker."

His manner was stinging and John rose.

"We'll leave Miss Foraker out of this," he said sharply.

Rowe's brows lifted. The voices in the next room broke off.

"What influence she has on me is none of your affair and none of my father's. We're talking a timber deal; not something personal. The girl concerns only me. It was my idea and I am going to insist on having things my way if I go in at all.

"I came up here, I saw the timber and its possibilities. Why, there's money in it, Rowe, lots of money for my father and for me! The fact that Miss Foraker is in a

pinch gives us a chance to be in on the deal at all. If she weren't pressed for money we'd never get in. I want to do this, Rowe, as much as my father ever wanted to cut pine in his life. I can't do it alone. I need his help and understanding.

"You can help me in this if you will. You have the authority to act for my father. You're on the ground. You have cruiser's report on the values. I make this sporting proposition to you: Help me out, interest my father in the plan I've put up to you and we'll pull together in a combination that can't lose.

"The timber's there; you can't get away from that; she's grown it to saw-log size. She's done it alone and she's reached the end of her rope. Look at the thing from my point of view. Get behind me with my father's money and I'll stake everything I hold dear on the bet that we'll clean up."

He stopped rather breathless. Rowe cleared his throat. From the other room the sound of footsteps, a closing door. Men went down the hall.

"And suppose I tell you I am not interested in seeing it your way any more than your father is?"

"Then it will be up to me to fight you both!"

A gleam of triumph swept Rowe's face. "You mean that? That you will fight your father in this thing?"

"You heard me!"

"And you want me to tell him this?" leaning forward in his chair. "You want me to tell him that you will actually fight him? That you will not even stand aside?"

Color flooded Taylor's face. "Tell him just that," he muttered. "Tell him that I have made my choice, that I stand by the forest. I don't relish fighting him — but

I'm ready to go the limit. That's final, Rowe. That's all I have to say."

The other rose and put down his cigar.

"It will interest him," he said ironically. "It will interest him more than anything has since you first mentioned the timber. I—" his eyes ran over Taylor's face craftily. "I will go back tonight with your message. Beyond a doubt you will hear of it—and before long."

They stood silent a moment.

"Then we understand each other," said Taylor and with no more took his hat and walked out. He went down the stairs, down the steps and along the walk. He did not notice the two figures on the hotel verandah, two men who stopped talking when he came out and watched him go. He was in a swirl of impulses. Go to Detroit and face his father? No, that would do no good. Stay here, confide in Helen, summon Humphrey Bryant and plan their campaign of resistance? Or think it out himself? There was time—and he again shrank from the ordeal of making Helen know what he had brought upon her by trying to help.

In his room Phil Rowe lighted a fresh cigar, looked at his reflection in the faulty mirror and smiled.

"That makes it very simple." He laughed nervously. "John Taylor—as an heir, you're a wash-out—and as for this other, I'll strike so quick you'll not get your breath!"

On the verandah Milt Goddard leaned closer to Jim Harris.

"I knew it all along," he said, thickly, watching Taylor.

"I knew he wasn't on the level and didn't mean any good by her."

"Course, it's none of my business, Milt, but I never like to see a square girl get taken in. Miss Foraker don't like me, thinks I don't like her, but maybe she'll wake up and find out who her friends are — some day."

He sighed in satisfaction and half closed his eyes and scarcely heard Goddard's heavy threats, made against Taylor.

All last night Harris had lain awake, trying to determine just what had struck his plan yesterday to knock it into a cocked hat. Humphrey Bryant had been the agency, yes, but there was something else, he felt, something beneath the surface.

His day had been replete with serious conversations. First had been one with Rowe in which names and figures and details were discussed. Then he had summoned the boy Lucius and talked gravely to him — so gravely and earnestly that the lad's eyes bulged and when he left Jim's room he walked with the bearing of one who is excited by great responsibility. And then he talked with Henry Wales, his good nature giving way to hardness; Sim Burns came to see him and they were locked up for an hour.

These conferences were followed by a gossipy journey up and down the street ending in the poolroom where the proprietor laughed with him over Black Joe's Bunion story; but in the midst of the laugh Harris sobered and smoked a moment and asked questions — about Black Joe's coming, about young Taylor; and when he learned that they had asked about his cigars and his habits the other man said:

"That Taylor's a funny cuss, ain't he? Yesterday he seemed more interested in the clock than he did in what Joe had to say."

"Yes, he — huh? The clock!" Harris stared blankly at the other a moment and then picked the band from his cigar carefully.

"By the way, Jim, what's this story about the Foraker girl gettin' Hump' to sit on the road and court house plans?"

"All rot! There's a kink in the tax law they brought up," he lied, "and they're tryin' to dodge taxes, but they'll never get away with it; not while I'm interested to see the country prosper."

"Dirty work, eh? Is that so! Always knew Hump was a nut, but never s'posed he was crooked."

"No, none of you ever did. He makes a dog's hind leg look like a straight line. But wait — you wait. Somethin's going to drop!"

Shortly thereafter he walked out and as he passed the *Banner* office he looked at the litter behind the dusty windows malevolently.

"You're one, Hump' Bryant — and young Taylor makes two — I'll get you as sure as water runs down hill!"

It was dusk when John and Bryant and Goddard drove into town. Harris watched them from the hotel verandah, studying Milt's sullen manner toward young Taylor. He knew men and motives, did Harris. Little of the bearing of men escaped him, because frictions were the material with which he could always work.

Taylor went into the hotel and Goddard came to sit beside Harris. Later they also went upstairs, for Harris had something important to say to the big woodsman. He did not need to say it, however, the long arm of

coincidence reached out that evening and drew four men together, and through the thin partition Milt Goddard heard from Taylor's own lips all that Harris had wanted to tell him. After that they went down to the verandah and smoked again — and the work was done.

Harris smiled contentedly when Goddard walked away to join Taylor and drive back to the forest.

Milt scarcely spoke on the trip, but watched John carefully, patient and planning. He had given an empty warning to Helen and now backing for it had fallen, as it were, from the sky. He would not strike too quickly! He would let this upstart go to the end of his rope and bring him up sharply! Helen Foraker would know whom she could trust!

Two long-distance calls went out of Pancake that evening, the one to Luke Taylor and the other to Marcia Murray at Windigo Lodge, and when they were both accomplished Rowe went to drive with Harris. While they rolled slowly down the river road Rowe listened, rather startled at times, but always reassured by what his companion had to say.

"I'd figured I might have trouble with Milt, but it was as easy as kissin' a pretty girl. For years he's been sweet on her; he's been green-eyed ever since Taylor got the inside track.

"S' help me, I didn't know you and Taylor were upstairs! But Goddard stood in my room and heard with his own ears the young cub beg you for help — and it sounded just like he wanted to cut that pine himself, the way he put it! Better than any lie *I* could have thought up! Oh-ho, that's rich!"

"But you got him out just in time."

"Lord, it had my heart in my throat! I couldn't hustle him out fast enough. I figured any minute the kid 'uld blow up and cuss you out."

Further on:

"But won't Goddard blow to Miss Foraker?" Rowe asked.

"Hell, maybe Taylor will himself. But there's a bigger chance that Goddard suspects Taylor is on his dad's side and if we can get 'em fighting among themselves, it'll be all down hill and shady.

"I tell you, Rowe, you don't want to underestimate the kid! He put one over on me Saturday and if we don't scotch him he'll make more trouble — but he's gone on the girl, and she's a bug about that pine of hers, and Goddard is nuts about her and jealous of Taylor and thinks Taylor is tryin' to force her to sell — and there you are!

"The iron is hot, my friend. Better grab your hammer!"

"He thinks I'm going back to Detroit tonight. But there'll be no grass under my feet! I'll talk to her before the dew's dry in the morning!"

CHAPTER XXIII

PHILIP ROWE's interview with Helen may be divided into two parts. The first is unimportant to this narrative. Keenly planned, adroitly manœuvered, he brought the talk up to the point of values and put his request for an option.

The man had aroused the girl's distrust from the beginning; he came unannounced, he was so low spoken, so sure; his eyes were so steady. She listened to what he had to say carefully, talking little, telling herself that he was trying to draw her out, while he appeared to be telling of himself and his wants.

"The forest isn't for sale," she said simply, when he stopped.

"So we have understood. But circumstances, I thought, might have changed your mind. We have all respect for your ability, but we realize that the load is becoming too much for one of limited resources to carry."

His oily assurance nettled her.

"I think I am the best judge of that."

He shrugged. "For instance, there is the matter of taxes."

"That is serious, of course, but state legislation is pending to remove that obstacle."

"One can never be certain, Miss Foraker, of the promises of politicians." She started to interrupt and said: "Our senator, Humphrey Bryant —" But he went on, looking hard into her eyes, "or the tenure of office of — states-

men. Besides, you are in debt; your obligations are coming due and money is very hard to get on timber now." His tone was becoming ironical.

Helen sat back in her chair, feeling weak and dizzy. His manner pierced her assurance, his knowledge of her affairs shook her self-confidence.

"You know a great deal about my troubles," she said evenly.

He bowed his sleek head. "Business men no longer do business in the dark, Miss Foraker."

"But, when I tell you that the property isn't for sale —"

"It is not convincing." Beneath his suavity was something terrible, hard and brutal; he no longer smiled, but leaned forward intently.

"You're a young woman standing alone under a terrible burden. You have proven your point, that timber can be grown as a crop. That should satisfy you and you should let go. Your whole life is before you. It isn't proper that you should slave on here, headed straight for ruin. Besides," drily, "a man of powerful interests wants what you have created, is willing to pay you a good price, but he *wants* it. That is what counts with him, that is what should count with you, if you are — wise."

He lowered his voice on the last word and in its flatness was a suggested threat.

"I am sorry to disappoint him."

"He does not know what disappointment is." When her eyes widened at his statement he smiled for the first time. "He knows only triumph. He knows only how to win!"

Her color mounted. "Are you threatening me?"

He spread his hands in a gesture of humility. "Only

trying to help you! Asking you to name your figure."

"And threatening me if I refuse!" Her voice was sharp and brittle and brought slow color to Rowe's face.

"You are too hasty, Miss Foraker."

"Too tardy, I should say. I don't care to sell, Mr. Rowe, and I have work to do."

She rose.

The man leaned back in his chair and smiled. "You have the courage to refuse a man who has all he wants but happiness and sees happiness in the possession of your forest?"

"I haven't the courage to give you what you want."

He looked narrowly at her then. She was beyond his experience, neither a grasping old maid, an empty-headed girl or the type of business woman he had ever encountered; young in years, old in experience and her manner carried a front that quite baffled him.

"I don't wholly understand you," he said, as though that did not matter, or as though it might flatter her, "and perhaps you don't understand me quite thoroughly.

"There are other factors involved. You've been doing a courageous but unwise thing by meddling in politics."

"Politics?"

"The story is coming out about Saturday's affair in the court house—oh, yes, I know about that too! Strangely, people throughout the county do not seem to think as you think that their supervisors are all scoundrels. They believe that there was black work from the other side, from you, Miss Foraker. They believe they have lost their chance at improvements through the efforts of Senator Bryant on your behalf. Their temper is not pleasant."

Helen smiled. "My work is still waiting. All this is interesting, but there's no use talking any more. I'm sure."

She moved toward the door with the poise and finality that sent a wave of anger through Rowe.

"Miss Foraker —"

"Please! Please, don't try to talk or argue. I don't like your half threats, Mr. Rowe. You don't frighten me — but it is unpleasant. As far as your coming here, I have told you that it is useless. I will not sell."

There was challenge in her gesture as she opened the screen door. He could not know that her legs were unsteady, her heart racing. He moved toward the step, hat in his hands, and stood beside her.

"I will leave you now," he said. "But I am coming again. Had your work been a little less — er — pressing, I might have told you more of what you face; but you're not interested anyhow, even though your back is to the wall."

He went out and did not look back.

The girl moved to the center of the room and stood there, hands at her sides, shoulders a bit slack, looking up at her father's picture above the bowl of wild roses on the mantel.

"Father?" weakly. "Father, I'm frightened! And he said I couldn't keep on and almost makes me — believe it!"

CHAPTER XXIV

MILT GODDARD saw Philip Rowe's departure. He stepped out of the road to let his car pass and remained beside the ruts watching until it was out of sight.

Rowe could have come but from one place by that road and he hastened on to the big house under Watch Pine. At the door he paused a moment, irresolute, but when he stepped in and saw Helen at her desk his indecision departed; her head was bowed, arms about it and he saw her shudder. For the space of a dozen breaths he stood looking at the girl, sensing her trouble, but in his face appeared no sympathy — only joy!

"Helen, what is it?"

He stepped forward as she sat erect and rose, to walk toward the mantel.

"Nothing," she replied.

He was beside her.

"Don't put me off!" he said with the manner of one who is very certain of himself. "You've got to listen, now. Maybe if you'd listened when I tried to give you warning you wouldn't have been so upset this morning."

His assurance, his evident knowledge of what had happened, startled her.

"Warning? What do you mean? Do you know what has happened?"

"I don't know, but I can make a good guess; and to make a good guess a man has to know *something!*"

"You talked to — that man?"

"To Rowe?" He shook his head. "I've never spoken a word to him, but I know what he was here for." His mouth twisted in a half smile of triumph. The girl stood staring at him while voices came to them from the river: a sharp command and excited response, as the last of the hardwood logs swung round the bend. "He came to buy you out, didn't he?"

"Yes, I refused, of course, and he went away making threats. He knows all about us, Milt!"

"He knows all about us!" he echoed and laughed briefly. "And that's what I tried to tell you once and you wouldn't listen."

She caught her breath.

"I don't understand you."

Until then he had been tense, almost belligerent; but with her last words he relaxed and looked away, because he did not want her to detect his gladness. She was begging him, now, to reveal what he knew and the groundless warning which he had given weeks ago loomed large and real; Taylor was a traitor in her camp and he could prove it. With Taylor gone, with his own sagacity proven — It was a sweet moment for Milt Goddard!

The averting of his face set eyes toward the river. Taylor and two others worked to free a raft from the bend in which it had lodged. He saw John's lithe body put its strength to the pike pole, saw the logs sink beneath him as he shoved.

"Once you told me I was your good friend," he began. "You still think that, don't you, Helen?"

"Of course, Milt."

"It's the place of a man to look out for his friends, I

take it. I've tried to look out for you, but you couldn't see it that way. You thought it was another thing."

His thumbs were hooked in his belt and he stood very close to her.

"I have worked for you, Helen, I've fought for you once or twice when it's been necessary. I've took all the interest any man could take in this forest when it's stood between you — and me. I told you once that sometimes I hated it. That's right. I do, sometimes. But I've kept on doing my best for it because you're right when you say it's your life. Anything that might harm this timber would be like somebody layin' hands on you and that's why I can stand it. If I've done that, ain't it right for you to expect that whatever I do is for your good? Ain't it reasonable for me to think that you'd — trust me?"

"I do trust you, I always —"

"Not always," he interrupted, voice rising slightly. "I tried to warn you once, but you put me off. It's been hard enough to keep still and wait for proof when I knew the Folly was in danger, but that wasn't nothin' compared to how hard it was to keep quiet when I knew — after I saw him kiss you."

One of the girl's hands went slowly to her breast. Goddard's face darkened.

"I did see that," voice trembling. "I looked through that window and saw it! I saw him hold you in his arms and saw him kiss you, and you — you didn't drive him off as you would any other man who come to strike at this pine, which is your life."

"At the *pine!* Milt?"

Her hand dropped to his arm and gripped the great muscles.

"You told me you didn't have time to love because this forest was your life; you've been fooled, Helen, fooled by a slick tongue and — and — you've been blind to what's goin' on. You've not only risked losin' what you call your life, but you've risked breakin' your heart! I can't talk the way he can, but I can't lie the way he can! I can't lie with words, I can't live a lie! Oh, I knew! I knew from the beginnin'. I couldn't be quite sure then, and you wouldn't believe me — But I am sure now! I could tell you the whole story. I could tell you what Taylor meant when he kisses you; I could tell you about this man Rowe, but I won't. Ask *him!*" He flung out an arm toward Taylor in the river. The girl held her eyes on his and her lips moved, but no sound came from them. "Bring him here," the woodsman said heavily, "and I'll *make* him tell you!"

For a moment she stared into his face. "You want me to bring — John Taylor here — to tell me —?"

Wretched suspicion ran through her. She was helpless to do else than yield to that suspicion before this man who was so certain, so convincing.

"Yes — Now!"

She went down the steps, crossed the plot of dry sod. Her legs were not steady. The one hand was again at her breast. She did not consciously move along; it was as though the will of the woodsman prompted every minute movement of her body. She reached the path beside the river bank and faltered and went on. Taylor, moving back to the high-riding hemlock log in the center of the freed raft, looked up. He waved and smiled; and then stopped still, for even at that distance her weakness was evident.

The hand, which had been at her breast, rose slowly and beckoned.

"You want me?" he called.

She tried to speak but could not, so merely nodded and beckoned again.

He spoke to the men with him and as the raft gained way planted his pike on bottom and vaulted across the strip of water.

She had stopped, the wind whipping her skirt about her legs, making her body appear to sway like an unstable stalk.

"Helen, what is it?" for he saw her blanched face and parted lips.

"Come," she said, hoarsely, and turned while he was yet yards away and started back towards the house.

"Tell me," he demanded, taking her arm as he came up with her.

She drew her elbow away from his grasp and looked at him as one who, even in half consciousness, shrinks from the undesirable.

"Helen? —"

They were at the steps. Goddard, glowering at Taylor, held back the screen and John followed the girl into the room. There they stood, Helen backing against the mantel beneath the bowl of roses and her father's photograph. Taylor looked from her to Goddard and caught the vengeful light in the man's gray eyes.

"What's the trouble," he asked, evenly, some deep-set impulse rising to steel him for a crisis.

Goddard spoke.

"There's been a good deal goin' on lately to cause suspicion. Some of us have had our eyes and ears open."

He could not help grilling Helen for the pain she had caused him. "Now it's come to a show-down, Taylor, and we want to ask you a few questions."

His manner was galling. Resentment rose with a flush to Taylor's face, and behind that came fear.

But he said, outwardly at ease, "Fire away."

Goddard looked at Helen, who had not moved. Her breast rose and fell quickly and she was chalk white.

"In the first place you know this man Rowe, and there is no use denyin' it."

"I hadn't thought of denying it," he said, and looked to Helen as though for an explanation of this performance. He saw in her face that fright — and a growing something — *suspicion?*

"I thought so," jeered Goddard. "Now will you tell us what his job is?"

"He is my father's private secretary."

He saw the girl start sharply, heard an inarticulate whisper from her; saw Milt settle himself on one foot and smile grimly and nod.

"Yeah. Working for Luke Taylor. He came up here for Luke Taylor, didn't he? He was here just now on your father's business, wasn't he?"

Rowe here! He had lied, then; he had not gone back to Detroit last night; the days of grace which John expected had not materialized. He had been tricked, outguessed! It confused him.

"Look here, Goddard — Helen. This is something I've feared for a long time. I've been trying to work it out for weeks and I've kept still because you had enough to think about. I can explain if —"

"That's what we want, Taylor, is for you to explain.

We know the rest — that you've known about this all along."

The man's bitterness was a trap closing about him. It was bewildering, terrible — it, and his sense of guilt. He was in a corner, hedged in by mounting suspicion.

"Helen, this isn't fair!"

His voice sounded strained. His one hand, uplifted, seemed unconvincing, only a gesture of supplication, a plea for mercy.

Helen detected this, saw his confusion contrasted with the certain strength of Goddard, and color flooded back into her face. The suspicion that had been in her eyes gave way to something else, to actual hostility. This man was also of that group for which she had no charity.

Taylor read that. His heart faltered and the hand sank slowly, but as it went down something rose within him: Pride. He had been dismayed, shaken, frightened, terror-struck by the fact that she suspected him of — Ah, he knew what suspicions his indecision could nourish! And now this other thing surged up, this pride, which would not let him beg. They had snatched at conclusions; he had made his mistake, but they would not give him opportunity to clear himself. She would not believe him innocent of wrong intent, she would not trust him.

"Yes, I will tell you why he is here," he said quietly. "My father sent him here to try to buy this forest."

"And how'd he happen to come?" Goddard advanced closer with his question. "Did you send for him?"

"I did not send for him."

"Sure of that? You had nothing to do with his coming here?"

"I — I had everything to do with it. I told my father

about this timber, but I did not ask either of them to come here."

He knew that his answer sounded like an evasion even before Goddard turned to nod at the girl.

"You're wrong," Taylor cried out, moving forward impetuously, looking from one to the other. "You're all wrong; you're misjudging me, you're not giving me a chance!"

Something like hope, he thought, leaped into the girl's face, but Goddard interrupted thunderingly:

"Chance? What chance did you give Helen, here?"

"Every ch —"

"No chance at all! You brought Rowe here, you let him bring in his cruiser and go over the place and you covered it up. You let him go to Detroit and talk it over with your father. You waited for him to get back yesterday with his answer. You —"

"You're wrong, I tell you!"

"Shut up!" Drunk with the sense of dominion, Goddard brooked no interruption. "You went to Pancake yesterday. You knew Rowe was there. You went to his room in the hotel and talked with him. You want your own way in this deal; you told him that and I heard you; you ain't fooled me. I've watched every crooked move you've made. 'There's money in it,' you said, 'for my father and me. The fact that Miss Foraker is in a pinch gives us a chance to get in on the deal. If she weren't pressed for money we'd never get in.'"

"You said that, Taylor, and you said you wanted this as much as your father ever wanted to cut pine in his life. You begged Rowe to help you out. Begged him to get behind you with your father's money. And you argued

him over. He was here today to buy and he knows the mess Helen's in — because you told him, because you told the things she told you, you snake!"

He *had* said those things. His own words repeated by Goddard, pelted in on his consciousness, battering down the strength that had prompted him to admit everything before coming out with the explanation; his words, confused and rendered him helpless.

Again he turned to the girl. "Helen, do you believe —"

But his golden moment had passed. The pride which had held him quiet to take punishment and emerge with an explanation and clean hands had robbed him of the opportunity to clear himself. He had stood quiet; he had made no denial and now as he looked at the girl he saw only the tight set of her mouth, the barrier of her searching stare. She would not speak! She damned him with her silence! She had whispered love to him but in this moment she had no faith!

Love? — *That* was no love!

He could not know that beneath that front Helen's heart was breaking. She felt lost, like a little girl who is lost. She had given her trust, her lips to this man; she had challenged Goddard when he warned against him, but Goddard had been right. John Taylor had not been worthy of her trust, let alone her caresses — else why that silence? Why had he admitted the black charges? He had betrayed her while he made love! Oh, she was sick and weak and faint, but her high temper was up. Her forest was her life. Today John Taylor, through Phil Rowe, had struck at her life! There could be no answer to that!

She moved to her desk and sat down, trying to still the

flutter of her heart; the tremor of her hands, fighting back the blackness that seeped up to clutch her consciousness.

"The last of your logs will be at the mill tonight," she said. "Here is last week's statement. We will be finished with your cut within a week."

This was dismissal and he rocked under the blow of her decisiveness.

"Yes — finished — And I will be going — now."

He turned and brushed past Goddard, leaving the house, going to his bunk, packing his suitcase with cold hands, a fog before his eyes, rage within his heart. She had no trust for him, she would not listen!

And remorse came to him because he had shrunk from facing this situation before, when there was time to explain, when he might have been believed.

Until Taylor had disappeared within the men's shanty Milt Goddard stood watching him. Then he turned. Helen sat at her desk, hands gripping the chair arms for a frantic hold on reality. He moved toward her and put his big palms on the desk.

"I warned you," he said thickly. "I was right, wasn't I? And now I guess you know which man it is that —"

"Don't you say that word!" she cried hoarsely, springing up. "Don't you say it to me, Milt Goddard — Ever! — Nor any man! *Any* man! —"

She drew the back of one hand across her mouth as though she would wipe from it the memory of Taylor's kisses. She started to speak, but breath caught in her throat.

"Ever!" she cried again, chokingly and turned and fled.

CHAPTER XXV

ABOUT the time that Goddard was putting Taylor through his ordeal, the sheriff of Blueberry dropped into the *Banner* office. The editor was in the back room cutting paper for a handbill job when the officer thrust his head through the open doorway.

"Howdy, Hump," he said.

"Many of 'em, Joe! Anything special?"

"I'll leave it on your desk.

He disappeared and Bryant went on with his work, but something in the sheriff's tone lingered as a disturbing echo and presently he went into the front office and picked up the folded document. He scanned the outside carefully and his lips worked slowly in the white beard. He opened it, turning it up so he could read. When he had read he sat down quite suddenly, as though weary all at once. After a time his printer came to the door and asked about the paper.

"I started cutting it; finish her up, Will," he said.

He rose and climbed the stairs to his rooms above. He took off his vest, for it was hot, and unbuttoned the neck-band of his stiff-bosomed shirt.

"Oh, dear," he sighed.

He drew out his own rocker to the window and then brought the other chair from its corner. He sat down, but did not rock. His pudgy legs sprawled awkwardly, giving to his posture a significant listlessness. When he

did move it was to stretch out a hand and stroke the arm of that other rocker as though he touched the arm of a dear friend for assurance and sympathy and comfort.

It was there that Helen Foraker found him. She was well within the room before he was aware that her car had halted below and her feet sounded on the stairs. He started up and summoned a smile.

"You're a ray of sunshine," he said wearily, "in a sunny but dreary day.

"Why, Helen!" looking sharply. "What's —"

She turned away quickly and he moved toward her. But she faced him with a sharp movement and said:

"Nothing much — but trouble!"

Her voice was hard and flat and her eyes were dry but he read that in her which she held back by heroic effort. He stood there a moment.

"Let's have it now — It's hurting you."

And, sitting in his wife's rocker, she told the story of Rowe's coming, in short sentences, hands clasped tightly in her lap, not looking once at her listener. She finished.

"Luke Taylor? His — father?"

"Yes, his father," dully.

The old man leaned closer and put a timid hand on her clenched fists. "And — he knew?"

"He knew, Humphrey — Oh, he knew!"

And with these words the flatness went out of her voice. It was the cry of wretched pain!

An hour later: "I have trusted so few people in my life and of them there has been only one worthy. That is you, Humphrey. I'm depending on you so, now!" His eyes shifted from her face uneasily. "It's make or break

right now. I'm at the end of my rope and whether I let go or can climb back depends so much on you."

"There can be no dodging of anything now," he said. "At times it has been easier to trust Providence and put aside thoughts of threatening influences and to think only of the present. But the present and the future are too closely linked today, Helen. I have tried to be your helper. I will try so long as my bones and spirit hold together, but, to be an influence for good, one must have standing, authority or security—I have had little standing among the men of this county, but I have had authority and security because I've kept my hands clean while they fingered the mire of political degradation. Until now I have been an influence because no man has dared question my integrity. They've dared everything but that—until now."

"Now?"

The old man drew the paper the sheriff had left from his pocket, as if it required great physical effort.

"This," he said, after an interminable pause and in a voice which was husked, "is an order to appear in Probate Court Thursday and show cause why I should not be removed from my guardianship of Bobby and Bessy Kildare."

A flash of rage showed in the girl's eyes. "Be removed!"

"Removed—They have looked over my annual inventory and find that I've loaned fifteen thousand dollars of the children's money on four sections of your land. They are now calling on me to prove that I have not mishandled the funds left to my keeping."

"But you can. Fifteen thousand—and for four sections!"

He smiled wistfully.

"I have not betrayed my trust; I have not made unwise investments. I can show that. Although our national idea of justice is to consider the accused innocent until he is proved guilty, in practice the accused is damned forever. He may escape legal punishment, he may prove that he has been besmirched by foul hands for despicable reasons, but he can never quite live down the question that was raised.

"I have trod upon the toes of a great power, of Chief Pontiac himself, and this is his method of fighting back. It's a good one — questioning the guardianship of a man over orphans!"

He cleared his throat rather vehemently.

"There is no charge that could be brought which would be more likely to ruin a man's influence. It may cost me my hold over the board in this matter of your taxation. It may cost me my seat in the senate."

"Oh, not that! Why, it may not even be Harris who is behind it."

He shook his head gravely.

"None else, my dear. The complaining witness is Lucius Kildare, the children's only living relative. It is immaterial to comment on the mental calibre of Lucius."

"But, Humphrey, if you prove — "

"Vindication is not the important thing, my dear. When you say that you have relied on me, you are right. When you say that I am your only trustworthy friend, perhaps you are nearly right again. You do need friends, but you need friends with influence, and if this matter ever reaches a hearing, my influence, I'm afraid, is gone. I will be scoffed at as a betrayer of orphans.

"A great missile to hurl — a betrayer of orphans!"

"But what can we do?" she asked.

The old man rose. "Do?" he murmured and, drawing down his spectacles, walked to the high walnut bookcase. He opened the glass door and took down a huge volume, bound in black leather, stamped with gold. He returned to the window and riffled the thin pages. Pausing with a thick finger on the passage sought, he looked at her with something like a smile in his eyes. "Do? Fight! Fight, my dear! Fight as the men of Henry the Fifth fought at Agincourt! Fight — because it is an honorable battle. Fight with the spirit that Shakespeare poured into the ruler of Britain. Listen!

"—he which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart . . .
We would not die in that man's company
That fears his fellowship to die with us. . . .
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when the day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors, . . .
Will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say "These wounds I had on Crispin's day." "'

His voice was profound, speech slow; he recited more than read those lines which reek with courage; his eyes snapped, his frame seemed straighter.

"—'And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd;

We few, we happy few, . . .
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.' "

He closed the book and dropped it to the table.

The girl rose. Her face was flushed and she breathed rapidly. The call to battle was in her blood!

"I'm not afraid of scars!" she said unsteadily. "With you, Humphrey — I will fight with you!"

He held out his arms and she swung into them and shuddered against his body; his hands stroked her hair; his old lips went to her forehead in a gentle kiss and he lifted his eyes in a flash of suffering, for he knew that upon her heart that day were scars of which she never could be proud.

CHAPTER XXVI

AND there Agincourt fell upon them!

The weekly newspaper from a neighboring county made its appearance with an article on the front page which began as follows:

"We understand that our good neighbors in Blueberry County are being ham-strung by certain interests which want to take money out of the county and put nothing back in the shape of taxes. It is said that underground political forces have been so successful in their black-guard activities that their new court house, badly needed for years, and road improvements are halted for the time being.

"Our people may congratulate themselves on being free from selfish and reactionary interests. It is a stain on the fair name of any community to have the presence of such leeches, etc."

Copies of this journal appeared in numbers. Within twenty-four hours farmers up and down the river and in the far corners of remote townships found marked copies of the paper in mail boxes and did not need rapidly running rumors to establish the identity of the "reactionary interests" as Foraker's Folly. Rumors and grumbling and discontent spread quickly and when Helen Foraker drove the sand roads she was followed by black looks and talked about sourly by men who had hoped to profit at her expense.

Humphrey Bryant had taken advantage of an

unexplained loophole in the law, the story had it, to enable Foraker's Folly to grow rich at the expense of the rest of the county. But wait — wait! was the word passed by the supervisors, who had said little and looked wise, for Harris again had them in hand.

And another sly story crept about: That young John Taylor, son of the great and remembered Luke, was no idle son of a rich man. He had been at work for weeks to get possession of the Folly. He had come for that purpose, he had wormed his way into the girl's confidence and had then come into the open. That was why he was living in Pancake, boarding with the widow Holmquist and awaiting the ripening of plans that would mean much to the town and the county.

When men came to Jim Harris for confirmation of this story he shrugged and said little; but he said enough and his eyes carried a fine twinkle when he said — just enough.

Milt Goddard heard this and carried it to Helen.

"Rowe is making his cracks that Taylor was here all the time like a — a spy," he said.

She turned away so abruptly that the gesture was more stinging than any reply she might have made. Goddard's hour of triumph had been brief, indeed. He had dismayed John Taylor, but it had gained him nothing — for the present. He could wait, though; he could wait. He told himself that as the flush which Helen's wordless rebuke had caused began to fade.

Other happenings: For instance, Rowe and Harris drove out toward Seven Mile Creek, turned off before reaching the mill and followed a pair of dim ruts along the edge of the swamp until they came to a small clearing

with an ancient log cabin squatted among the balsams. There they halted and Harris sounded his horn until its hoarse voice startled birds in the forest.

Inside the cabin, a stirring, a shuffling step, and Charley Stump appeared in the doorway.

"Hello, Charley."

"Hello," falteringly. "Who are ye?"

"It's me, Jim Harris. We come out to have a talk." He chuckled. "We want to settle, Charley!"

The old man's face showed indecision. He was not sure whether to be flattered or frightened, but the two visitors entered the house with so much good nature that he was put at ease.

The three sat down in the foul smelling room and talked for long, quite earnestly, in low voices, and now and then Rowe or Harris went to the doorway and looked out.

Charley stood beside the car when Harris started the motor.

"An' when it's all over will you give me a set of tires for my safety, too, Jim?"

"Tires? You bet, Charley!"

Both men laughed.

The second day after Rowe's visit to her house, a letter mailed from Pancake came to Helen. It read:

"You will do well to clear out of this county. We have stood for your ways long enough and do not want you for a neighbor at any price. If you do not go of your own will, things will happen which will make you clear out anyhow.—Citizens' Committee."

With an impatient exclamation she tore the sheet in half, but arrested the gesture to throw it into the waste

basket, smoothed it out, and later that day carried it to the office of the *Banner*. Humphrey read it slowly; then snorted:

"Citizens' Committee! It's not hard to guess where this came from!"

He paced the office with the greatest show of rage Helen had ever seen him exhibit.

"I'd be willing to bet my last penny that Harris wrote that note himself and that Rowe looked over his rascally shoulder while he did it. They're thicker than thieves!"

"Could we prove that?"

"No. Give the devil his due, Helen, they're slicker than eels! This is blackmail and they'll take no chances, just as they're taking no chances in trying to ruin me!

"I've haunted the court house, I've tapped every underground wire of information I have, but they've cut me off. Not a soul knows a word outside the rascals who have planned it and the rascals who are going to execute their orders. They're saving this thing for a knockout blow and they're taking no chances of spoiling it by letting the plan leak. By keeping quiet they have everything to gain and not a whisper to lose."

Closeted in Jim Harris' room in the Commercial House that night, Jim and Phil Rowe and the Judge of Probate talked in half tones over their cigars.

"If there's a leak we'll spot it," said Harris. "The three of us, the kid and the sheriff are the only ones who know, except Bryant himself. He won't squeak, so that if anything does get around we'll know where it comes from."

His hand on the table clenched and his eyes showed no humor as they fixed a penetrating gaze on the nervous little judge.

"If she comes off all right, we'll be able to answer the old question about who cracked cock robin, an' when I'm through with him he can squawk as loud as he wants about Chief Pontiac's valuation and they'll laugh him out of the country. I'm afraid of no robber of orphans!" He mouthed the words in satisfaction.

And so while the county buzzed with hostility against Helen Foraker, that little group waited for the hour when Bryant, her only support, would walk from the court house a discredited man, for they knew, as well as the editor himself knew, that for their purposes the charge was as good as conviction.

Humphrey was to have gone to Detroit Monday night to find an investor to take up the mortgage which Wilcox, the new cashier of the Pancake Bank, had informed Helen by mail must be met at the end of the month, when it was due. But the serving of that notice to appear in court Thursday altered all plans.

It was on Tuesday morning that John Taylor entered the *Banner* office and confronted the editor. The old man looked up from his desk with a searching stare instead of his usual smile.

"You've heard, of course, about me," John said after a brief exchange.

Humphrey pushed up his spectacles and nodded "Everything."

"And you think that I'm—"

He did not finish. The other examined his pencil tip carefully; then looked up once more.

"Helen has been like my daughter since her father died. I have no children of my own. I have no kin. I'm a lonely old man and in her I've found an outlet for all the sentiment that old men have. What harms her, harms me. In rational processes I might differ with her, in purely natural reactions — I don't care to discuss them."

"You believe, then, that —"

"I don't want to be unjust or hard, Taylor, but in this matter you'll have to excuse me. You wouldn't try to argue with a father whose impulses and sentiment were strong, would you?"

A warning flash of unreasonable but natural temper was in his face and John went out, standing a long time on the edge of the sidewalk, staring across the street.

He had gone about in a half daze since leaving the forest yesterday. He felt numb and heartless and guilty and hurt. His mind would not stay on his affairs. He tried to put it there by a trip to the mill at Seven Mile the next day, but he was in a panic for fear Helen would come and he would be forced to confront her. He was glad to be back in Pancake that night, but his room in Mrs. Holmquist's house, where he had sought refuge from Rowe and Harris, was stifling so he walked down First Street slowly and sought an isolated chair on the hotel verandah.

The night was sultry. Preceding nights had been warm after scorching days. Each evening clouds gathered and rain was promised, but no rains came. Day after day the brisk, dry wind had fanned the country, browning the brakes, bleaching ripening June grass, wilting the foliage of aspens.

John saw the lights go out in the office of the *Banner*, saw the old editor come outside and toil up the stairway to his rooms above. The light came on there and Humphrey stood in his living room and took off his stiff bosomed shirt and stood motionless an interval. Then he did a strange thing. He drew up two rockers to the window for all the world as though he expected a visitor. For a time he rocked, then he rose and turned off the light and Taylor imagined he sat down again beside that empty chair in the darkness.

Lucius came along the street, smoking a cigar with a deal of manner. There was that in his bearing which indicated stimulants.

"Hello, Mr. Taylor!"

"Hello, Lucius."

"Hot night."

"Yes. Hot."

Pause.

Taylor hoped the boy would go on but he mounted the steps and dragged up a chair, propping his feet pompously on the rail.

"Hot an' dusty an' dead," he said ponderously. "Pancake's as — as flat as a pancake!"

His silly giggle confirmed the suspicion that he had been drinking.

"Well she won't bother me much more b' God. It may be hotter in Detroit but it ain't so dead, I'll tell the world."

"Going to Detroit, are you?"

"I'll say I am! Just as soon as I get this here, now, case off my mind I'll be on my way." He wagged his head and hitched his chair even closer and whispered. "You know, Taylor, we got old Hump sunk."

"Sunk?"

"I'll say we have! Leave it to Jim — Besides," brandishing his cigar, "I ain't no man to go off an leave th' kids in a hole. That stuff don't go down y' know, Taylor. Business 's business, but when it's stealin' from orphans, why that ain't business."

Taylor sat silent, every muscle tensing, letting these ambling suggestions sink in — Harris — Bryant — orphans — this case —

"Sure not," he said watching the youth.

"Course, you know all about it," went on Lucius. "Rowe says you're his friend an' so does Jim. Fine feller, Jim. He give this advice for nothin' an' even agrees to slip me a little change so's I can go to Detroit when it's all over." He giggled. "An' he slips me a little now so a feller can enjoy himself in a town as flat as a pancake."

Taylor managed to hold his voice steady.

"You'll be pulling stakes soon, then."

"Yup," lowering his voice. "After tomorr' a. m. prob'ly. Y'see, the case comes up at ten in the mornin'. Jim says that's all there'll be to it, just have th' old devil appear in court an' answer my complaint that he ain't done right by Bobby an' Bessy when he lends their money to the Foraker girl."

He rolled the cigar in his lips and nodded importantly.

"Then it'll all be over tomorrow? That will end it?"

"So far's I give a damn it will. It'll ruin Hump', Jim says an' that's all we want. He won't be hornin' into other folk's business, then—"

Lucius giggled. "Tha's all. I don't give damn about th' kids. I don' care what they do to old Bryant. I'm out after th' jack, I am! So's I can get to Detroit an' a real town."

He nudged John with his elbow. "I'm from Pancake, but I'll show 'em a step or two when I land there with fifty dollars!"

"Fifty dollars is a lot of money," said Taylor.

"Not a cent too much! I told Jim it wasn't when he offered it to me to sign th' complaint over in th' judge's office. It won't last long, but then, I can get a job easy, I can —"

He ambled on with his puerile boasts while Taylor's mind worked like lightning.

"Have you seen Jim tonight?" he asked, to bring the boy back to those pregnant facts.

"Nope. Don't 'tend to, neither. He give me five on th' promise that I wouldn't get jingled — But, hell, Pancake's too dead for a sober man. Besides I ain't told nobody but you — an' you know it already. It's all fixed, anyhow. We'll have old Hump sunk an' I'm th' complainin' witness, ain't I?"

He sat up in his chair and swayed to peer closely into Taylor's face.

"Can't do nothin' without me, can they? Can't turn a wheel, can they? Huh! Guess I got a right to get jingled a little on your money! I ain't any damn fool, Taylor. I know what's goin' on. All you fellers want is to get Bryant out of th' way so you can raze this Foraker girl back into th' brush an' you an' Rowe get her pine." Spit. Wipe of hand across an uncouth chin. "B' God I ain't so damn dumb!"

No, he was not damned dumb! He saw through Harris' scheme and his words brought order and reason to Taylor.

So they were after Bryant, were they? They were framing him? And then, with him out of the way, Helen

Foraker would be at the mercy of Luke Taylor! This was Jim Harris' plotting, but he knew that Rowe's hand and mind had not been idle. John sat up.

"Suppose," he said, "that the case should be postponed. Suppose they should hold you here a long time? Wouldn't you expect more than your fifty?"

"I'll tell a man I would. But they won't. The probate judge's fixed an' old Bryant can't turn a wheel to save himself. My part's done in ten minutes tomorra. Tha's all. Night after next I'll be steppin' out among 'em!"

In the poolroom across the street appeared the figure of Jim Harris, walking behind the tables, looking among the loafers in the far end of the room.

"There's Harris," said Taylor.

"Where?" Lucius started sharply. "Say, I better shake a leg! If he thought I'd been drinkin'—"

He rose. Harris was talking to the proprietor behind his counter. Taylor got to his feet.

"You'd better clear out," he said. "He'll see you sure. Here, come along!"

Half shoving the confused boy he left the porch, whisked around the corner and was out of sight when Harris, scratching his head, appeared outside the poolroom and scanned the deserted street.

"Close shave!" whispered Taylor, slapping Lucius on the back. "But we're safe now."

A plan was forming in his mind, forming, oh, so slowly! He flattered the boy, directed a stream of inane banter into his ears as he led him down the dark street, keeping his tongue wagging while his mind drove along in search of a workable scheme.

"You got any hooch left?" he asked finally.

He could see Lucius wink heavily.

"I'll say I have. Want a touch?"

"You know it!"

They made their way by circuitous route to the rear of the livery stable, careful not to show themselves to Jim, who still stood in the street, watching stray passers. Lucius entered the red barn, fumbled under the cushions of his rattle-trap car and brought out a bottle.

"Here Jack, ole kid, touch her off!"

He was exceedingly familiar and rested an arm across Taylor's shoulders and John tasted the concoction. That was enough; one taste. Its vile strength gave him assurance; liquor like that fitted well with his maturing plan. He wiped his lips and passed the bottle to Lucius.

"Drink hearty!" The silhouette before him tipped the bottle up and the liquor gurgled.

They went out, taking the whiskey, and wandered to the railroad track where they sat on a pile of ties.

"Don't take too much," Taylor warned. "That's stiff stuff."

"Nev' min' me. I c'n carry m' hooch! Why, Jack, I ben drinkin' ev' since I wus so high — here, have touch."

Again John tasted and held the bottle in his hands for a long interval thereafter while he talked, humoring the boy, laughing at his tawdry boasting, edging the talk further away from Harris.

In the distance the south-bound night train whistled. The little town was asleep and dark. A light in the Commercial House and one in the bank made the only relief in the close night.

"Lucius, what if Harris throws you down? What if he gets you into court and then holds out on you?"

"Think he would?" The youth seemed sobered for the moment by the prospect. "If he did, I'd get him, b' God! Don' give damn 'bout th' case — all I wan' 's a crack at Detroit."

"Let's move on."

They rose and went toward the station. They were the only people astir. The train whistled nearer and they could hear its distant rumble when the uneasy breeze died.

"Lucius, let's not wait for Jim! Let's make sure of this — go on down to Detroit tonight!"

They were on the station platform, face to face, and Taylor took the boy's arm as he planted this suggestion.

"You 'n' me? Sure —" Then he shook off Taylor's hands groggily. "Sa-ay what you wan' me to go tonight' for?" an ugly note in his thick voice.

"For company. I'm going down the line tonight. It'll be all right. I'll tell Jim all about it. You've done your share and if they've got anything on Bryant they can get along without you. Besides you're not sure of your fifty yet, and I'll buy your ticket."

Far off a blue-white glare in the sky told that the train was swinging around the big bend, rushing down on Pancake, which was not a schedule stop.

"You 'n' me? Lucius an' Jack."

"I'll promise you a job if you go — tonight."

"Tha' righ'? Gimme a job? Say, Jack, you're all to the candy — you —"

He said more but Taylor did not hear. He drew a folded newspaper from his pocket and struck a match. The train was very near, the ray of its headlight swinging in towards them, throwing buildings into sharp relief. He held the match to the paper. The torch flared and

he waved it. The locomotive whistle barked twice and fire streamed from the brake shoes —

In the cindery seat of the smoker Lucius settled himself with a satisfied grin. He fumbled in his coat for the bottle, drained it with no offer of hospitality and then, tossing it into the night, pillowed his head on the window sill and, passed into oblivion.

"One to Peerless and one to Detroit," said Taylor to the conductor.

Peerless was the first stop.

Dirty, uncomfortable men slept or smoked stupidly in the car. None paid attention to Taylor. He joggled Lucius, drew his head up from the sill and it fell against the seat-back, but the boy gave no indication of awakening.

Quickly John searched the other's pockets, taking every penny of change except a lone dime. Then he took an envelope from his own pocket and wrote on it:

"Go to Mr. Richard Mason, Mason Auto Wheel Company. Tell him who your are and that John Taylor sent you. He will take care of you and give you a job."

This he thrust into the boy's pocket and sat back, lighting a cigarette with unsteady hands.

The brakeman came out of the smoky vestibule.

"Next stop Peerless! — Peerless —"

Taylor lurched down the rocking aisle.

"Listen, Charley," taking the trainman by the arm. "My drunken friend has just street car fare. The address he is going to is in a note in his pants' pocket. Tell him about it, and keep this for yourself."

He shoved a bill into the other's hand and went down the car steps.

"All right, boss, good-night."

The man smiled and waved a farewell as the locomotive snorted to be under way again.

Peerless, too, was asleep but not so soundly as Pancake. There were a half dozen street lights and one upstairs window of a business block showed life. The metal sign of a telephone company reflected the glow within.

John knocked and parleyed with a feminine voice on the other side. For some time entrance was refused, but finally a frightened little girl plucked aside the shade, peered out and with misgivings allowed him to enter.

For three hours he sat beside her switchboard while she worked to rouse rural operators and get a wire into Detroit. He did not let her rest and was rewarded finally by a sleepy voice in his ear.

"Hello, John; what the devil's up?"

"You're up — and I'm up — Listen, Dick, I'm sending a man down for a job."

"Don't need any men; turning 'em off every day."

"Makes no difference — His name is Kildare, Lucius Kildare, and he's on the way down with just enough money to get his hangover and appetite to your plant."

"Give him a job and keep money away from him — Yes — Ball and chain, if necessary — A job at your house would be fine!"

"What's the game?"

"A big one. Do as I say because it's more important than anything I've ever asked of you before. If you let this kid get back into this country in a month I'll never ask another favor of you as long as I live!"

A laugh came over the wire.

"If it's that serious I'll put him up at the club! Or how about a straight jacket?"

"Good idea and night. Go back to bed. Many thanks, until I can explain."

He walked out of the telephone exchange unmindful of the wondering stare of the operator. He strolled to the small station and sat down on a baggage truck to smoke and wait for a north-bound morning train. The cigarette glowed idly and the coal shrank into its shell of ash. He leaned his head back against the wall of the building and fixed his eyes on a faint star, low in the north.

He reflected.

This was the thing he could do. He could fight his father, Phil Rowe, Jim Harris; all these other men and influences that were aligned against Helen Foraker. He could put his best into that fight and make a courageous attempt to drive away the menace he had brought upon her. He owed her that; he would square his account.

He felt just the least bit heroic as he planned that fight and a tinge of bitterness crept into his attitude toward the girl. She had professed to give him her love, but when the crisis came the forest was uppermost in her mind. Her life, she had said it was, and perhaps that had been truth because she had shown no willingness to give him the benefit of the doubt — after she had given him her caresses. Her ready defiance which he had once thought splendid seemed a weakness, now.

And yet before the north-bound train stopped for him he became cold and lonely and was prompted to go to her and plead his case. But he could not do that, he told himself. He had been wrong, he had dodged and twisted and failed to meet the issue, when it concerned this girl who never dodged! He was small, small beside her, and her consequence seemed even greater as he pictured her, backed

in a corner, fighting these powerful forces which sought to overwhelm her.

Until midnight Helen had been out with Goddard and Black Joe watching a ground fire run itself into a wet marsh. She undressed very slowly and sat on the edge of her bed. Watch Pine whispered restlessly above her house this night and struck a responsive chord in her heart. Until now she had thought of John Taylor only with anger. He had come to her, she had helped him, she had loved him, only to have him strike at the vital thing for which she lived and worked. But tonight her weariness could rally no resentment and her thoughts persisted in straying back to sweet moments. When he had fished with her at evening, when he had been beside her desk at night learning the things she had to teach; when he had talked of his father; when he had pledged his allegiance — and when his lips had first touched hers. Now, there was no wrath to think that he had come so close to her heart, but only a sense of emptiness, loneliness. Was her forest *all* that mattered? she asked herself.

CHAPTER XXVII

It was an agitated little county official who sat in the office of the judge of probate of Blueberry County and whispered into a telephone.

"I tell you, Jim, there ain't nothin' I can do if the complainin' witness don't show up. No — no — I can't — I'm helpless. Can't you come down and talk it over?" glancing at the clock. "It's only nine-thirty; we got a half hour."

"No, I can't come. This thing looks like a fliv, and if it does, the less anybody knows about it, includin' J. H., the better." A grit came into his lowered voice. "And if — get out, Central! — any stories get around we'll know damned well where they come from."

"But, Jim, what can I do?"

"Stall, you poor simp! Stall and give us a chance to dig up our party!"

At ten o'clock Humphrey Bryant entered the court room, trying to keep the droop from his shoulders.

"Say, Hump, I made a mistake in th' time. Come back at eleven, will you?" the judge asked.

And at eleven the editor was there — and waited until twelve and the judge made excuses and went out and darted into the Commercial House and inquired frantically for Harris.

"He said," said Henry, coughing into his pallid cigar, "he said if you called that he couldn't keep his engagement this mornin'. He said you'd understand."

Ten minutes later Humphrey Bryant walked back to the *Banner* office. It required no effort, now, to keep the droop from his shoulders!

It was evening before Jim Harris returned to Pancake. He was bland and good-natured so far as a casual observer might have known, but rage seethed in his breast. He entered Rowe's room and flung off his vest irritably.

"Damned if things don't pinch out!" he grumbled. "I'd've sworn that kid would stay put."

"No word of him?"

"Not a whisper. He may be dead for all I know. I didn't dare raise a stink for fear —"

His gray eyes flickered with baffled rage.

Rowe paced the room.

"That's one hold on her that slipped," he said. "We've got to get busy, Harris. The old man won't wait all summer, and young John —"

He stopped shortly. "Say, you don't suppose —"

Harris looked up.

"Dah! Hell, no! — Huh? —" he seemed startled, but relaxed and shook his head again. "I guess not, Rowe. He's quick in the head, but I don't think —"

He did not say what he thought. His glowering look went out the window to the office of the *Banner* and rested there blackly. In the rooms above Humphrey Bryant was packing his bag. Tonight he could take up Helen's fight again!

It was after supper at the Commercial House. Harris and Rowe were on the porch smoking, conversing in casual tones, trying not to appear confidential when John Taylor came down the street. His face was drawn and pinched.

"Hello Taylor," said Harris as he came up the steps. Jim had never ceased to be genial with this particular enemy.

"How's tricks? Understand your cut's about finished."

"Yes, two or three days more."

"You'll be pulling out, then?"

Taylor stopped beside him; there was something in his gaze, a direct, penetrating quality which caused Harris' eyes to narrow ever so slightly when John left off scrutinizing him and looked hard at Rowe.

"I don't expect to leave right away," he said. "Fact is, I intend to stay right here until another matter is cleaned up — as one of the preliminary steps I want to turn some of your money back to you."

"My money?" Harris asked.

"Yes, this." Taylor took a bill and some coins from his pocket and counted deliberately. "A dollar and sixty-eight cents; that's right."

He held out his hand to Harris who made no move to accept it.

"What's the idea, Taylor? You don't owe me a nickel."

"I'm beginning to think that I owe you a great deal — you and Phil Rowe," Taylor replied. "This, though, is not on our account. This is the money turned back to you from young Kildare. I took it from him when he was leaving town last night, to escape charges of conspiracy and perjury — This will make fifty-one dollars and sixty-eight cents that you have saved on this little flier, Harris — Take it, you rat!"

His words bit savagely as he took that one quick step which brought him close to Harris. The man reached out, almost involuntarily, for the change. It clinked in his palm.

Taylor stood a moment, looking down upon them.

"Now," he said, "maybe we understand each other a little better. I said, Rowe, that I was going to fight you. This is the beginning!"

He turned and walked quickly away.

"Well I'll go to hell!" muttered Phil Rowe.

"And I'll keep you company," whispered Harris huskily.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DURING those hot June days no cloud obscured the sun, but its light came hampered to the parched barrens through strata of smoke from many fires. Far and near the country was patched with blaze; flames running through brush and dry grass, hot and greedy for an hour, to be baffled by some sandy road which it could not leap, or a lake or marsh which balked it; other fires, in the depths of swamp, smouldered for days, sending up vast quantities of dense smoke; hot blazes in slashings licked up logging litter and reduced the soil itself to ash by the fierce heat.

The supervisors, who are local fire officers, met the situation with all the variability of mankind. "Let her burn," said some. "It'll make it easier to clear," while others slaved at the deadening drudgery of checking fires in cut-over land.

The district warden, red of eyes, skin grimed by smoke, voice hoarse from days in it, covered his counties in frantic drives to touch the worst spots and keep his deputies at the grind.

Fire! At once man's best servant and worst enemy! Ah, you city dwellers, who explain so casually the faint pall that drifts on roaming winds as smoke from burning forests! It is remote, it does not touch you; you know none of the terror men know who watch its crimson ring close on their forests, their homes, their future, their very lives!

Within the boundaries of Foraker's Folly was efficient preparedness. In the open shed where Helen's car stood, hung a rack of brass fire extinguishers, with drums of soda and tight cans of water. It could be lowered in a moment to the body of the car and clamped firmly there to be hastened to any point in the forest. This was a recently adopted idea, suggested by New England methods. At a half-dozen points through her property small sheds housed two-wheeled carts laden with similar apparatus, and shovels and axes. Also, three telephones were placed in strategic points so word of danger might be sent to the house without delay for there is but one way to control forest fire: Get there quick! As Black Joe sagely instructed the new patrolmen, "Get that when you c'n spit her out!"

All day long a look-out swung in the top of Watch Pine, but when the smoke was dense that vigilance was not enough and from three to a dozen men patrolled the outer fire lines. Some of these rode horses which were harnessed and ready to be galloped to one of the equipment stations and drag the apparatus to action.

It was racking work. With evening came relief, because fire in the open loses its vigor with dusk; but each night which brought no rain only promised increased tension for the morrow and Helen Foraker felt her nerves stretching taut. The smoke cloud was enough to think about, let alone that other cloud which hung over her — or the emptiness in her heart!

There *was* emptiness there, and it grew with the days and this afternoon as she felt herself rocked gently by the wind — for she was on lookout herself — the girl stared out across the forest that had been her whole life and was

struck by its inadequacy. There was something lacking, something vital had gone, and its passing dated to the hour of John Taylor's departure.

She had known too little sympathy, had had too little support in those years she had been forced to fight with men like Sim Burns, she had put up with ridicule and feeble attempts at double dealing and with the burden of her work, but she had always met them with a stout fighting spirit. They had stirred her temper and left her heart untouched, but now she seemed only to be making fighting gestures, with no spirit behind them.

Bobby Kildare appeared below and called in his high treble that he wanted to come up. Bobby always wanted to come up! He begged throughout the summer to be in the crow's nest and, taken there, begged to be left alone with the responsibility of watching for smoke.

"All right; come slowly, Bobby," she warned and, eager hands and feet and eyes all alert, he came up the ladder, held to slow progress only by her repeated caution.

"There!" he sighed as he set foot on the platform and Helen dropped the trap closed. "There, I am!"

His face was very bright, lips parted eagerly as he took the field glass and stared to south and west.

"No fires in sight," he said. "Huh!" and looked at her and shifted his feet and Helen laughed at his enthusiastic happiness.

"No fires near, Bobby — where were you this morning?"

"To the — at the mill, playin' with the Injun boys and Henny Raymer.

"Aunt Helen, are you going away?"

"Away? No. Why?"

"Oh, Henny said his father told his mother that you were going away. He said it was a party."

"Party?"

"Well, Henry said you'd been invited to go away by the voters — who is voters, Aunt Helen?"

She answered him absently and took the glass to stare with unseeing eyes out across the smoke-screened land.

That first warning from the anonymous Citizens' Committee had come on Tuesday. Wednesday brought another which she had not opened at once because she received it with other mail at the mill just as the saw struck a railroad spike buried in a log and scattered in ringing bits.

Raymer had scratched his head and looked at her with startled, owlish eyes.

"Somebody done that," he said dully. "An' this mornin' th' weights had been taken out of th' idler box an' she wouldn't saw. We lost two hours."

Later, as she read the curt warning, she saw connection.

Today was Thursday and the relief which had followed the call from Humphrey Bryant, telling her that the case against him in probate court had been dropped for lack of witnesses, was dissipated by the arrival of another warning.

She saw again Phil Rowe's ruthless smile; heard again his oblique threats.

Goddard came in that evening.

"What's the weather report?" he asked, eyeing her steadily, as though his mind were not on his question or the fire menace.

"Continued fair," she answered and did not look up.

She was strangely uneasy with Goddard now, a new reaction to him, born with the events of Monday morning when he had confronted Taylor with his charge.

"Saw Sim Burns today." He fussed with his hat as though reluctant to go on, but Helen said, "Yes?" and he proceeded: "He says he's got some cedar he's sold to Chief Pontiac. Wants to drive it down and says he'll serve notice on you to open the boom at Seven Mile unless you do it yourself."

"How much cedar has he?"

"I don't know. They got out some posts last winter. I recollect some poles, too, but there couldn't be over a carload."

"We can put it over the boom for him cheaper than we can tear it out."

"Yeah. I said that, but he wouldn't listen. Wants the river open."

The girl tapped her desk with a pencil.

"So that's another item, is it?"

"Looks that way. He's doin' it to make trouble. The county's pretty well stirred up, Helen," looking at her closely. "They're talking nasty!"

"Talk is easy to stand."

"But there's more than talk. Those warnings you get; what's happened at the mill — I tell you, Helen, they're too many for you."

"You'd have me quit?"

His eyes shifted.

"I don't want to see you — broken." His eyes raised again to her face, dog-like, and she knew the plea that was in them, the plea which she had forbidden him to speak. "You won't listen to me," he said heavily, "an'

I was right once, wasn't I? Wasn't I right — about Taylor?"

"Yes" she said. "Yes, you were right," in a tone suddenly thin, and which rose alarmingly in pitch.

Helen dreamed as she slept that night. Taylor came to her and said as he had said one other time, using the words of Bobby: "And if I try hard to learn all that you will teach me — when I know as much as you, will you marry me?"

He seemed to be standing very close to her. He held out his arms and, staring into his face, trying to rebel, her feet had carried her forward. He had smiled as his arms closed about her, imprisoning her, her forest, her life, making her helpless— Then his lips had lowered to hers and as their mouths touched her heart raced, her cheeks took fire, and in her ears was a strange ringing, ringing — a ringing which grew louder and more insistent.

She found herself in the middle of the room, bewildered by a glow in the sky and by the sound of the insistent telephone bell. She ran barefooted down the stairs to lift the receiver.

"This is Raymer," a voice said. "A deck of logs is on fire and the others are in danger."

"Is your pump working?" faculties clearing.

"The hose had been cut. We need help!"

"Coming!"

She called to Goddard out the door, dressed and flew to the garage where men were clamping the platform of fire extinguishers on the body of the car. They raced through the night, with the stain of fire growing brilliant before them and came out at Seven Mile to see the mill in sharp silhouette and flames leaping high from one bank

of her pine logs, the next one to it smoking threateningly.

The chemicals went into play and the fire was held to the one place, but it was daylight before buckets, used when the worst heat was over, could drench out the last embers.

The hose, which was on its reel in the mill, had been carefully cut in a half dozen places.

That day came another warning:

"What happened last night is only a start. Unless you make a move to clear out, we will show you what real vengeance is.— Citizens' Committee."

It had been mailed twenty-four hours before the fire broke out.

That noon John Taylor, walking between two of his lumber piles at Seven Mile siding, stopped shortly and then squatted and eyed the ground, touching it here and there lightly. Some one had been sitting there and moving his feet restlessly — not many hours ago, either. And in the sand was another mark, perhaps like that made by a bicycle —

John walked back along the edge of the swamp later. The road was little used and grass grew rank in it. But here and there where the ruts ran through black muck the imprint of an automobile tire was set in perfect pattern. The car had stopped at Charley Stump's cabin and turned about there. He returned to Pancake on the afternoon freight and before going to his room at Mrs. Holmquist's he stopped a moment before the Commercial House and eyed the tires on Jim Harris' automobile.

It may be recorded here that the next evening the Widow Holmquist was talking with her neighbor as she watered her garden.

"Yah, he ees a funny man," she said. "He ben out all hours of de night. Nefer see nodding like it, an' yust to tank that he'd bring that old Charley Stump to my house yust to give him a cigar an' set mit him in my house! Yim Harris, he was askin' me about him today, too. Dere's somethin' funny!"

That night Jim Harris, Phil Rowe and Wes Hubbard sat in Rowe's room. Harris was writing with a pencil laboriously, disguising his hand. He chuckled and then, as he finished, muttered: "Signed, Citizens' Committee!"

The others smiled. They did not see the face which had peered at them over the transom lower nor hear the man move stealthily away down the hall, carrying the chair on which he had stood.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE house party at Windigo Lodge was breaking up Friday. Dick Mason himself had been gone a week, but his guests lingered on. Those who had stayed were now bound for other retreats: the St. Clair Flats, the Huron shore, Lake Michigan resorts, Canada and a variety of places. But Marcia Murray had no place to go. She had hung on at Windigo because leaving meant a return to the none-too-comfortable apartment in Detroit, with her summer broken only when invitations called her out of town.

She had let drop, a detail at a time, the change that had taken place in John Taylor; not the change in his attitude toward her, but his new idealism, his new interest, which was foreign to the understanding of those who knew him. They listened, incredulous at first, but Marcia, keyed to save her face, was sharply clever and her suggestions had the intended effect.

"Of course, that's all very fine." Fan Huston had commented, "but, my dear, what has he to offer you?"

"Everything," said Marcia and smiled lightly.

"Everything! Why, he has nothing, unless his father—"

"He offers everything he *has*," Marcia corrected, "and that of course, is very splendid, but — quite intangible."

She forced a fresh gaiety, her eyes seemed brighter, her laugh more ready and on occasion she put forth a stressed mockery which gave them to understand that it was

John Taylor who was now being kept impatiently waiting. So much, to preserve her standing.

Phil Rowe telephoned daily. He had come once for an afternoon and the visit had caused the lifting of eyebrows and a deal of whispering, but Marcia had been cryptic in response to attempts to draw her out and they learned little. But to Phil Rowe she gave her lips again and laughed close in his face, with her arms about his neck.

Rowe was as keen and ruthless in love as he was in business. He wanted this girl with all the intensity of a selfish heart; he saw through her, knew that she would go to any one of a score of men who might bid the highest, knew that she had favored John Taylor above himself. But there were two things in life he wanted: control of the Taylor millions and possession of Marcia Murray. The latter was dependent on the first and he was bound to have them both.

He learned soon that John Taylor had slipped through her wily fingers and knew, therefore, that her one hope of marrying the Taylor fortune was in marrying him. Marcia was not wholly aware of this factor. For a time she believed she had succeeded in making Rowe think that John still regarded her as his promised wife and she held to this lie while she told herself again and again that Taylor was a fool and that she was well rid of him.

But there were nights when she lay sleepless and miserable and even desperate. Give her credit for this: beneath her exterior, which was as hard and cold as glass, there was a sense of human values and when she saw that her appeal had not been able to compete with the wholesome womanhood of the girl of the forest, she had her periods of heartache and tears. And something else

which was now and again almost regret that John Taylor, changed, poor, without the ambition she demanded of men, was no longer bound to her.

She was to drive back to Detroit and was taking Fan and Tom Huston with her. She wanted one more hour with Rowe and so, before leaving, she indicated that they must start early to provide for a few hours in Pancake where she could have some work done on her car. They could make Saginaw by night and finish the trip the next day. Fortunately for Marcia, misfortune in the shape of a severe headache visited Fan Huston and as soon as they reached Pancake she took to a lumpy bed in the Commercial House while Tom engaged in a Kelly pool game with three drummers.

Marcia inquired for Rowe and learned that he was out of town but would be back before noon. She bought a magazine and settled herself in the parlor of the hotel to await impatiently his coming. Her eyes were on the pages, her mind occupied with other things; she was inattentive to the comings and goings in the office across the hall until she became conscious that some one was staring at her.

She looked up quickly. John Taylor was standing just outside the doorway.

"Hello, Marcia," he said.

She did not move or reply for an instant, nor did he advance; just stood there, framed in the white door casing, while the girl's mind spun, trying to identify this man with the one she had known and held and planned to possess. On their former meeting she had been too desperately engaged with the game she played to take much notice of the change that had occurred in him, but now,

seeing him so unexpectedly, it was as though she beheld a man remade.

He seemed larger; he was rough and unfinished. His shoes were heavy and scuffed; his pants were khaki, he wore a white cotton shirt open at the throat and no coat; a soiled straw hat was in his hand, the big, brown toil-stained hand which hung at his thigh. There was roughness in his face, too; he had not shaved this day, but there was no hint of uncouthness in his neglect, for the skin of cheeks and chin was bronzed by sun and wind, and seemed to be shaped in new lines. There was a different set in his mouth, a gravity, a maturity that had not been in John Taylor two months ago. His blue eyes, though they smiled, now, seemed steadier, more grave, and very serious.

"Why, John!"

Her cool voice was low and she rose quickly, half frightened.

"I didn't know whether you'd want to see me or not." He was embarrassed as he advanced and looked into her flushing face.

"That shouldn't have been hard to determine," she said coldly.

"I suppose not. I guess we have said everything to each other that can be said, haven't we?"

"We have!"

She tried to breathe normally, but the leap of her heart would not let her. She felt her knees tremble and averted her gaze from his steady scrutiny.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I told you that once. I say it again, Marcia. I'm so sorry — but it was better this way than — going on, wasn't it?"

She looked into his face again as in all friendliness without the suggestion of a whimper, he said the things from which most men would shrink.

She heard her voice saying:

"Yes. Anything was better than going on." She tried to put sarcasm into the tone, wanted to wither him with her scorn, but somehow those mercenary impulses in her were weakening, breaking down, those maxims and values that had been nursed and cultivated to stifle the Marcia Murray who might have been, were giving way, and with that release of something finer and gentler went her self-possession and her ability to fence with words. For the moment, she was genuine and burst out impetuously, saying the things she had said to herself during wakeful hours at Windigo, things she had told herself — but the truth of which she had denied.

"John, I made a fool of myself that day. I — you see — I have been badly mistaken; I've said and done the wrong thing for long — there are a great many things I regret and one of them is the scene I made before that girl — I must have hurt her."

"We all change, Marcia," he said with a grave smile. "I'm glad if you're sorry. It *was* unworthy of you. As for Miss Foraker, though, you waste time feeling for her. Not that she's thick-skinned. It might have disturbed her a great deal, but she's used to unpleasantness. She's had more than her share."

She said: "You think a lot of her, John?"

She pulled the straw sailor tighter over her golden hair, and in her eyes was something rueful as though she wanted him to make denial.

"Yes — a lot."

Marcia drew an unsteady breath and though she was in tumult now, that self-possession she had practiced for so long was her salvation.

"And she —"

A hurt crossed his face. It was an ordeal to tell the truth to this girl, but he could not evade.

"She thinks I'm her worst enemy."

For an instant a flicker as of hope showed in the girl's blue eyes but as she looked at his face, saw the lines of pain deepen, caught the sorrow reflected there, that hope departed and its tenderness, the genuine quality of it, was replaced by something sharp and hot; as natural, but far from gentle: jealousy.

"That's too bad," she said.

She meant that; but within her was confusion, a ferment, started by that injection of jealousy. Those good impulses lingered, struggling for a hold, but the other Marcia, the one who had first loved John Taylor for the sake of his father's money, who had played him against Phil Rowe, using both as markers in a mercenary game, slowly dominated, covering the anguish in her heart with a sort of joy at his pain.

And yet there was enough of that transient self remaining to wish this man kindness. She did not want him to stay until she lost her temper, until she should taunt him. Already the jealousy was changing to the acid of temper.

She held out her hand.

"Good-bye, John," she said, with something of the old indifference in her voice. "I wish you well. I must go look after Fan, now; we'll be leaving at noon."

She slipped past him into the hall. Her chin was up,

her eyes were cool and calculating. On the floor above she stopped and heard him go out. She looked about. The doors of unoccupied rooms were open, shades drawn, rickety iron beds decked in grimy coverlets. She slipped into the nearest, closed the door and bolted it softly.

Marcia stood there a moment, hand still on the knob. The other went to her face and formed a cup over her mouth. Her head tipped back against the door panel; her eyes closed. The trembling of her body shook the rickety transom and then the tears came. She moved to the bed and buried her face in the pillow. For a long time she was there, gradually quieting. When she rose she spent many minutes at the wash stand repairing the damage her outburst had wrought.

Fan Huston was picking up her things preparatory to departure. Rowe and Marcia stood in the shadow of the hotel. The man was listening very closely to what his companion had to say, with a queer twitching of his lips. She talked rapidly, earnestly.

"I've been a waster," she concluded. "I've wasted the finest things that were in me; I've wasted my appreciation, my best ambition, my intelligence. It's too late now to turn back so long as there's a goal in sight. I haven't the courage. I'm twenty-five, but being twenty-five and thinking as I have since I was in my 'teens means more than just being twenty-five.

"Don't misunderstand me, Phil. I can give you a certain happiness in return for the luxury I want. Without that luxury — no.

"This is your chance. If you fail, perhaps my chance will come later."

Her voice husked for the first time.

"Your chance?" he asked.

"My chance! I'm bound to you by my habit of thinking, now. I have some confidence that you will be able to give me the things I have sought for years. But if you should fail I don't believe that I could begin over, hunting fortune like a cat stalks its food. I'm weak — weak enough to want you to win; but if you should fail it might be necessary for me to try something else. I might be a nurse or an office woman or any number of things if necessary; and sometimes, lately, I've hoped it might be necessary!

"There, I mustn't cry! I'm sunburned enough, and it makes me weak. It's a long drive ahead. Here comes Fan."

When she was gone in a cloud of dust, whipped away by the hot wind Rowe stood at the curb a long interval, head cocked, watching her roadster disappear into the jack pines. When he turned back into the hotel he was scratching his chin and his crafty eyes showed a strange bafflement. He had found that thing in Marcia Murray which had staggered him in John Taylor, honesty and genuine impulse. In her, however, it had been but a flash, to revive again only in case he failed in the game he played.

He snapped his thumb and laughed — somewhat uncertainly.

CHAPTER XXX

TUESDAY. Still the sun glared through the smoke of fires. Clouds appeared, banked in the west, broke and disappeared. Each noon the wind dropped and hauled from southwest to the north and for a few moments its draft was cooled; then it came again from the other quarter, hot and dry.

Humphrey Bryant came back on the morning train and, without changing from his best suit of black, drove in a buggy to Foraker's Folly.

Helen read failure in his face even before he spoke.

"This credit situation isn't a newspaper flurry," he said. "It's real. Nobody wants this loan, Helen — not for the present. And the Lord alone knows how long it'll take us to sober up financially."

She sat down weakly and for an hour he talked, trying to be optimistic but without much success.

And then the girl talked, told of what had happened at the mill, told of the daily letters of threat. The butcher in Pancake had refused her check and that stung her despite the fact that the garage man had gone out of his way to be nice to her. Dr. Pelly had driven in to tell her that there were friends left her, no matter how great the bitterness that her enemies stirred against her.

Thad Parker had walked over from his farm where the sprouting crops were burned by the hot sun and cut to death by sand blown by tireless winds. He stumblingly told how he himself had lain in wait at the mill at night.

("I don't sleep much, now — since Jenny's sleeping out there under the oak tree.") He enumerated some of those in the community who were up in arms at the organized campaign against her. They were people of little influence.

That night Thad did not watch the mill. Raymer sat in the doorway of his tar-paper house, a shot gun handy, until the approach of dawn, when he went inside.

He had not seen a slowly-moving hulk come up to the edge of the brush and squat and wait, wait for hours, scarcely moving. But when Raymer went within the hulk moved back into the brush, wriggled prostrate on the far side of a charred log and went through the intrinsically innocent operation of lighting a cigar.

It crept forward again and waited; then rose and skulked in the shelter of the mill and appeared again on the dam, glow of the cigar hidden in the curve of a gnarled and unsteady hand — A crowbar prodded the earth, working down into the mud and muck. From his shirt bosom the man extracted very carefully a bundle of greasy cylinders and tamped them down into the opening his bar had made, keeping the long white tail which extended from the packet dry. He looked about and listened. His head bowed down, and with both hands he shielded the glow of the cigar, held it against that white tail — a sputter, a careful scuttling across the clearing and into the brush.

The sleepy chirping of the first birds was stilled by the heavy, muffled detonation. Mud and dry earth were thrown high. The gravel of the road which crossed the dam was broken and cracked. Water filled the crevices, began spilling through on the far side; the seep became

a rush; the rush washed out a gutter. This breach widened and before half-dressed men ran from the shanties the pond was roaring through the broken dam, lowering rapidly as its own escape made drainage faster. The birds picked up their chirping again and broke into song, but before they began to fly against the orange heavens to the eastward the pond was drained and half the dam washed away.

On the carriage in the mill was found a soiled envelope addressed to Helen.

"So far we've gone easy. If you don't clear out at once we will show you what we can do.— Citizens' Committee."

It was hot in Detroit that morning as well, with a steady breeze from the southwest which kicked up white caps in the river and made the pines in Luke Taylor's garden moan steadily. The old man sat in his library with the photographs of the Foraker timber that Rowe had taken spread about him on the table, holding a telephone receiver to his ear.

"Hello — Hello — You, Rowe?"

He hitched forward as an assuring voice came into his ear.

"What the devil's wrong with you?"

"We've been delayed a bit, Mr. Taylor."

"Delayed? My God, ain't you got authority and money? What's delayed you?"

"The party isn't quite ready to close."

"Not ready! What's holdin' it up? Money?"

"Well, no — they haven't made up their minds."

"Oh, they haven't made up their minds they want

to sell what I want to buy? I want to buy! Are you a dummy, Rowe, or just a dead one?"

"Money doesn't seem to be much of an object —"

"No object! My God, Rowe, now I *know* you're a dead one! You're no good; come on home. I'll go up and close the thing myself — no, stay there! I'll be up tomorrow — tomorrow — hear that?"

Phil Rowe emerged from the telephone booth in the Commercial House with the pallor of his face accentuated. To buy this pine had been to him the entry into his own, but Luke Taylor would not give him time. To have the old man close the deal himself would rob Rowe of his coveted glory. And so much depended on that! The drawing of the new will — his future — Marcia Murray —

He stood on the hotel steps. Helen's car was across the way and while he eyed it surlily the girl herself crossed the street. She moved slowly and her face beneath the hat of brown straw was dark and troubled. She disappeared through the door of the bank. Rowe remained there some time. For the days he had put in at Pancake, for his scheming, his duplicity, he had nothing to show but the troubled look on that girl's face. He was in doubt, with desperation mounting quickly. Oh, for another fortnight, a week — a few days! But he could delay no longer. He started along the wooden sidewalk.

Jim Harris sat beside Wilcox the cashier and as Helen entered they stopped their talk and looked at the girl and then at one another. The sheriff was writing a check. Sim Burns lounged in a chair. Wes Hubbard scanned a calendar in obvious effort to appear unconscious of Helen's presence, and a farmer from down river watched her curiously.

She passed on to the one teller's window, made a deposit, took a packet of papers from her skirt pocket and went into the tiny customers' room. Soon a step sounded on the threshold of the room and she looked up to face Philip Rowe as he removed his hat. His black hair glistened, his mohair suit was sleek, his black eyes glittered; his white skin seemed to shine, with smoothness, with slipperiness.

"Miss Foraker," he said and bowed, "may I come in?"

He did not wait for a reply but entered, drawing the door closed behind him and settled into the chair on the other side of the small table.

"I was going to call on you today," he said. "Then I heard about the accident last night and thought you might not have time. But since you are in town we may as well talk."

A pause. Her silence challenged him. He moistened his lips, picking at the blotter, eyes on his uneasy fingers.

"Perhaps I, being a stranger, am better able to judge your situation than you are — because I have perspective. I have seen people in similar circumstances, but I have never seen any one so hard pressed by public sentiment as you are — through no fault of your own, probably," with suavity.

"One cannot help admiring your pluck, but did you ever stop to consider that the line which divides pluck from — shall we say foolhardiness? — is not very distinct? It is courageous to fight not only your neighbors, but the laws of the state and the financial depression, but is it wise, Miss Foraker? Be honest with yourself. Do you hope to beat the game?"

He leaned forward, eyes on her face, steady and

betraying none of the misgiving that the latent hostility in her stirred in him. She gave no indication of replying, so he went on.

"I came to you in good faith and asked for an option. Had my intentions not been of the best I would have waited, for every one knew of the storm that was gathering about you. I didn't want to take advantage of misfortune. I come to you again, Miss Foraker, asking you only to name a figure. It will mean a fortune to you. It will enable you to seek happiness and peace of mind in more congenial surroundings. We will not be niggardly. We will pay for value received."

The suggestion of a bitter smile moved the girl's lips.

"And if I hold out? If I tell you again that my forest is not for sale? What then?"

He settled back in his chair and laughed shortly.

"Then the trouble may become a little — rougher. You have been warned of that."

His insinuation broke through her growing temper, touching suspicion.

"That is your guess, you mean," watching him closely.

"Not a guess!" he flashed. "I happen to *know!*"

"You are bluffing," she challenged. "You are working in the dark." He leaned forward again.

"I know what you know, that you have been warned repeatedly that, step by step, the warnings have proved to have foundation, that —"

"What warnings?"

She laughed tantalizingly and he flashed: "Warnings of a committee of —"

He saw the triumphant smile sweep into her eyes with the leaping rage as she stood up quickly and cried: "So

you know what no one else knows! I know of these warnings, my foreman knows, Humphrey Bryant, Doctor Pelly and a few others know, and for days they have tried to find who else knows. No one knows, but you and the other skulkers who have everything to gain by scaring me out!"

Guilt crimsoned his face. He stammered something which she did not hear as she stepped past him and opened the door. The sheriff, Hubbard, Burns and Harris were grouped about the cashier's desk; as she came out they looked at her and drew apart.

Rowe was beside her. "I don't know what you're talking about," he muttered, "but you're making a grave charge."

She wheeled to face him. "Grave is it? I hope the time will come when you'll realize how grave it is, when I can bring you to answer it!"

She stopped. Her scorching gaze ran from Rowe to that other group, to the three countrymen at the teller's window who had turned to watch. She was unaware that the street door had opened and another man stood behind her, staring at the scene.

"You, Citizens' Committee!" she said. "You blackmailers!"

They were all there, the interests which had schemed to undo her and the agencies they had used. For the first time she confronted them and all the pain and suspense which they had aroused was crystallized in righteous anger.

There was a stirring in the group, a muttering, but with a gesture, made imperious by her rage, she stilled them. She had not lifted her voice. She had spoken her

charge lowly and it was the poignancy of her wrath which gave her control over those men — that, and the consciousness of their guilt!

"No, I'm going to talk now!" as Rowe stepped toward her and began to speak. "You've worked in the dark, you've struck from behind but don't flatter yourselves that you've covered your tracks. You men — Jim Harris and his tools — you are the ones I mean, and let there be no misunderstanding! You have made a joke of law and justice in this county. You have stooped to the use of dynamite and fire to drive me out so Pontiac Power might profit and so Luke Taylor might make worthless slashings out of a growing forest! That speaks well for you, doesn't it?" She laughed mirthlessly. "Chief Pontiac Power and a millionaire lumberman using bomb and torch and blackmail against a penniless girl!"

Harris stepped forward.

"You're putting yourself pretty thoroughly on record, young lady," he said. "You're going too far with your talk about lawlessness. You may find out that there's a law which will protect the good name of —"

"Good name!" she scoffed under her breath. "Good name? Is it your good name, Jim Harris? Is your name good, Mr. Rowe?"

"Hold your tongue!" Rowe cried in a shaking voice and his viciousness staggered her for the moment. "You will have an opportunity to prove these things you have said about these men, about me, about Mr. Taylor."

The leap of light in the eyes of the man behind Helen Foraker snapped Rowe's gaze from her face and as he stared over her shoulder the sinister quality in his expression deepened.

"There are limits —" he began.

A step sounded beside Helen. Breathing rapidly, she turned and saw John Taylor standing there. She did not see the glare he gave Phil Rowe, did not detect the bewilderment in Rowe's face. Her heart paused in its wild measure. This was the man who had betrayed her, who had done more, even, than menace her forest. He belonged with these others — he, whose lips had been on hers!

Then he spoke.

"There are, Phil; you're right. There are limits to endurance. You've overstepped them."

His manner was quite easy, almost tolerant.

"So you —" Rowe began again.

"You will keep still now." John interrupted. "You will keep still," voice rising, "or I'll thrash you until you grovel on your knees before Miss Foraker!"

Rowe drew back. A choking sound came from his throat and he shook his head.

"If you know what's best for you, you'll keep out of this!" he cried, beside himself. "You've done enough now to damn you forever in the old man's eyes! You've blocked me for the last time, Taylor!"

John's hand was on his shoulder, gripping into the flesh. Rowe winced and twisted to be away from that grip, away from the blazing eyes.

He struck a quick blow, which glanced from John's cheek bone and then cried aloud as he was lifted from his feet and slammed against the wall. He felt fierce breath in his face as he struggled and cursed, felt hard fingers at his throat, felt a fist like a knot of wood bash into one eye, felt his lips burst like grapes at another blow and

found himself bruised and bleeding on the floor while men scuffled about him and Taylor struck again and again and cried: "I'll break your spine — I'll kill you, Rowe!"

They were on Taylor, trying to hold him, scrambling and shouting as he flung them off to be at Rowe again. And then the sheriff, drawing his revolver, brought it down smartly on John's head — and the fight stopped.

John stood up, the sheriff holding his arm, shaking him.

"That ought to be pretty good," said Harris with a laugh. "You all heard him say, 'I'll kill you, Rowe.' And look at Rowe's face! That ought to be about assault with intent to do great bodily harm less than the crime of murder, hadn't it?" to the sheriff. "We don't want to bear down *too* hard!"

Taylor felt his head and blinked as clear consciousness came back. He was being led down the street, up the court house steps, through the echoing hall; a barred door was closing.

Helen Foraker had heard, had seen the enmity between Taylor and Rowe. She stared at John and as he dodged that first blow she turned and stumbled through the doorway and ran across the street, leaping into her car, fleeing for the sanctity of her forest where she could think and reason and try to straighten this thing out for herself.

She had driven him out, yet he had blocked Rowe in his purpose. He had betrayed her and today he had been her defender. The throbbing of her heart almost choked her: wild hope and abject misery blinded her.

CHAPTER XXXI

PANCAKE does not figure largely in the schedule of passenger trains, but the next morning the five o'clock north-bound stopped at the station, let off a pair of sleepy passengers, moved slowly ahead, stopped and backed into the switch, where the last car with "Private" lettered on its doors was uncoupled.

A curtain went up behind a screen and the thin face of Luke Taylor peered out from his stateroom. His lips moved and his old eyes roved the visible portion of the little town eagerly.

The chef and porter were astir, very busy, very quiet.

Luke's arrival had been watched. Phil Rowe, hastening into his clothes, stopped long enough to peer out anxiously and then went on, arriving at the precise adjustment of his cravat with dispatch.

Jim Harris rolled over, half hung out of bed; saw the car at the station and lolled back on his pillow, stretching and grinning.

John Taylor, in a stinking cell of the jail, pressed his face against the steel bars of his small window to see. He had not slept, but had paced the floor all night. His hair was rumpled, face drawn and his blue eyes blazed with helpless fury as he watched Phil Rowe hasten down the street and mount the brass railed platform of his father's private car.

Rowe spoke quietly to the porter who replied in a

cautious whisper, but before the caller could sit down a muffled voice reached them.

"You, Rowe?"

"Yes, Mr. Taylor," he replied outside the stateroom door.

"Well, come in! Don't stand there palaverin'!"

From his rumpled bed Luke stared hard at his secretary, the chronic irritability which had been in his eyes yielding to amazement. For a long moment he studied the broken lips, the purple patch below one eye, the lump on a cheek bone.

"Who the devil did that?"

Rowe made a grimace.

"Your son," he said simply. A gleam of something like satisfaction leaped into the half closed eye and its normal mate. "We had a slight argument as to the advisability of your going ahead and buying this pine. It ended — this way."

For a moment Luke said nothing and Rowe thought the thin lips moved in a half smile of sardonic pride. But a flush came into the face and anger showed in the old eyes.

"He went that far? You're sure that was the trouble? He fought you to stop this deal?"

"And that's only part of it, sir. He has raised — quite a disturbance."

"Where is he now?"

"In jail."

Luke set his feet on the floor and stood up, night-shirt dangling about his shrunken calves. He was a stooped gaunt, scare-crow of a figure.

"In jail, eh? For what?"

"Assault."

For a moment the other stared at him, lips open.

"You're not lyin' to me, Rowe?" Impulses were in conflict within him; he breathed faster. "It was *that*, was it? It wasn't anything else? He did that because of me?"

"Yes, sir."

Rowe maintained his composure by effort. He saw the strange admiration in the old man's face, mingling with paternal instinct, with rage.

"No. You wouldn't lie — " a sharp hiss of impatience slipped from Luke and rage alone remained in his face. "Jail, eh? Lucky for him — th' cub. Lucky he don't have to face me this mornin' — after puttin' that face on you — for trying to carry out my orders!"

It was nine o'clock when young Wilcox, flattered and flustered, drove his automobile down to the station and backed it in beside the Taylor car. He cleared his throat nervously as Rowe helped the great Luke down the steps and got out of his seat to remove his hat and self-consciously acknowledge the introduction.

Luke merely grunted at Wilcox and settled into the seat. He had nothing to say as the car rolled out of town and took up the twisting trail to the northward. He had on a linen duster, his hat was drawn low, amber glasses protected his eyes, and as soon as they were settled Rowe tucked a robe about his ankles. Within a mile, however, Luke kicked this protection irritably aside and glared at his secretary as though the accustomed precaution against chill were an affront.

They topped a high ridge, made bald by repeated fires, and away before them spread the country, like a tinted

carpet. Dried grass gave to lavender in the distance; the wilted foliage of the brush and small trees took on a counterfeit vividness; far to the north and westward a veil of smoke hazed the horizon. But it was not the expanse of devastation, not the ominous smoke veil, that caused Luke to sit forward sharply. It was the long, blue-green line of the pine trees, Foraker's Folly, standing there in the middle distance.

"Pine?" he asked tersely and Rowe answered and talked volubly. But Luke did not listen. He sank back when they dipped into the valley, straightened again when they could see the forest, this time with the crowns of dominant trees distinct against the sky.

And then they were in the protecting cool of its shade, crossing the outside fire line, leaving the fringe of oak brush behind, driving into the clear stand of white pine.

From afar their progress had been watched. Black Joe, perched in Watch Pine, had caught a reflected flash of light. He followed the progress with his glass, dividing his attention between it and the fire to the northward. He called down to Helen:

"Big car makin' in toward Snipe Meadow."

He offered to go over himself and watch, but the girl shook her head. In a moment she shoved her canoe into the river, paddled down stream, rounded two bends, beached and went ashore, stopping to listen, but hearing at first only the sough of wind in the tops.

Wilcox looked around to smile into Luke's face.

"It isn't the kind of pine you know, Mr. Taylor, but —"

The slight gesture of a bony hand cut him off. Luke was leaning forward, goggles off, staring down the fire line which cleft the forest for half a mile before it disappeared over a low swell. His lips were parted, his breath fast.

"Tolman says this is probably the best of it," volunteered Rowe. "This was where the first photographs were taken and —"

The old man did not care what Rowe had to say. He reached for the door of the car, shoved it open and stepped to the ground. He stood there, looking up and about, leaning on his gold headed stick.

"Pine!" he muttered and cocked his head to listen to the talk of a thousand trees. He moved a few steps.

"White Pine," under his breath. "Michigan Pine — babies — baby pine!"

No, it was not the pine he had known, not the massive poles, not the clean timber, not the ragged, high tops. It was brushy, with trunks still retaining dead branches. There were no four or five-log trees; there were few that his men would have respected. It was baby pine, but it was uniform. There were trees that would yield two good logs, as saw-logs go today; there were a few that would make three. And it was thick! It was solid, without a Norway, without a hardwood tree in sight. It was straight, like straight, slim children, and it talked as the pine he had known and loved and mastered had talked!

Oh, that whispering! It quickened his heart; it refreshed memories that had been dormant for years; it tapped wells of emotion that he had forgotten; it sent a flush to his cheeks, a bright light of greed to his old eyes. He panted.

Rowe was beside him and Wilcox was leaving the car.

"There's ten thousand acres like this," Phil began, but again that arresting gesture silenced him.

At Luke's feet was a section stake. He half stumbled on it as he took a step and looked down. He lifted his face high, then, that he might see the sun. Impatiently he handed Rowe his stick and moved to the north edge of the line. He brought his heels together and looked ahead and began to pace. Ten lengthy steps he took and came to a halt, looking to his left, counting with soundless movements of his lips; to the right, and counting again, checking each enumeration with fingers that trembled. Another ten yards; more counting. Another ten, and again the checking of trees that stood to right and left.

Rowe and Wilcox stood in the fire line watching him, waiting, for Philip knew that this was no moment to interrupt. He watched his master disappear in the forest going toward the river ten yards at a time, now and then putting out a hand against a solid trunk for support because his limbs, though stronger than they had been in years, trembled with excitement.

Fifty-five yards Luke went, and he had estimated the timber on a quarter of an acre. Tolman was right; Tolman had been conservative! His heart rapped his ribs as it had not done in years. There was no distress in its measure; joy only, joy such as he had not known in years, joy, the taste of which was sweet in his mouth; joy which gave him strength.

Another ten — twenty — fifty-five —

"Pine!" he whispered; and then aloud, "Michigan Pine!"

He ceased his counting. He tilted his head to the talk in the tops above him.

Another sound was manifest; the murmur of the Blueberry, and he moved on, emerging suddenly from the thick forest to the high bank of the river and there he stopped. It ran below him, crystal clear, emerald water over golden sand, swirling into a violet pool at his right. Across the way was a fringe of reeds, freshness itself caught in color and behind them was a stretch of swamp, dead cedar and vivid tamarack against the background of more pine on the high land.

He did not see the canoe beached above him, did not notice the figure just starting into the forest, which stopped dead still behind trees to watch him. For a moment the wind abated and the talk of the trees ran into the faintest breath while across the way a white throated sparrow broke into his sweet, sweet song, as clear as the waters of the river themselves.

"O-o-o-oh, dear, dear, d-d-dear, d-d-dear, dear —"

Again his hand went out to the trunk of a tree, fingers gripping the bark this time with the tensility of a strange emotion. His face lifted to the clean sky and his heart opened to the song of the bird.

"O-o-o-oh, dear, dear, d-d-dear, d-d-dear, dear —"

He looked up at the crowns above him, the whispering tops of the pine trees; he turned to see the ranks of trees through which he had come, the trees he had counted. Something broke within him and light went from his eyes. Board feet! Always, he had looked at forests in the terms of board feet; today it was something else. There was more to this stand of baby pine than lumber, more than wealth.

A breath caught in his throat and his eyes dimmed. He listened again and heard that time in the whispers of the tops an echo of his lost youth; the trees, the river, the wind, the birds — it was a symphony of all that he had ever held dearest, of all that he had been denied, but even then he did not know that sentiment had broken down the wall that long years of effort, that great material triumphs, that final disillusionment had built as its prison. He moved toward the nearest tree and put out his hand as though for support; but he did not need help to stand. His palms pressed the bark on either side the trunk; then stroked, gently, as a man will stroke some dear possession.

"Pine!" he muttered — "Michigan Pine! Oh, God — I thank you — thank you! —"

He stood a moment watching, listening, feeling, smelling, letting his senses play with this great blessing which was within his grasp. Then he turned and started back into the forest, stride feeble but with returning strength, the strength of hope, of satisfaction — He went faster, with the haste of greed.

Once again the forest was so many board feet —

Helen Foraker watched him go. Then she sat down on the bank, legs dangling over the brink and slowly broke dead needles into bits as she stared abstractedly before her. There was in her eyes, behind the trouble, something like hope — a vision of an incredible opportunity.

"Where's the girl?" Luke asked as he emerged from the forest.

"At her home, likely," Rowe responded, startled by

the eagerness of the query and by the light in the old man's face.

"Let's see her now. By God, Rowe, Tolman was right!"

"If you think it best, Mr. Taylor. There are things —"

"What things?"

He paused, with a foot on the running board, but as he turned Rowe saw that this was no rebuke, that it was all interest and caution.

"It might be best to have you go over the local situation, let me explain what we have done, call in Harris and perhaps some others. It — it's likely to be quite difficult."

Seated in the car Luke said:

"Maybe you're right, Rowe. We won't take any chances. Let's go at it —"

"Mr. — Mr., whatever your name is, you don't have to go so damned slow for me. I can stand a bump or two!"

Upon the edge of Seven Mile Swamp Jim Harris stood in Charley Stump's cabin. He had the old man by the wrist and Charley had sunk whimpering to one knee.

"Afraid are you?" Harris snarled. "Afraid of what?"

"I tell you, he's been watchin' me, Jim! He follered me."

"There's nothing for you to be afraid of but me. He's safe. We've got him locked up. I can lock you up, too, for the rest of your life, you blackmailer! You do as I say — if you throw me down, by God, you'll do time!"

He released his grip on the withered wrist and the old recluse rose, rubbing the flesh where that clutch had been —

"All right, Jim — I'll do as you say — Don't send me

to jail, Jim! Don't send me to jail! — I'll do it tomorrow — at dawn, Jim, unless it rains —

"An' Jim — you mean that, about tires for my safety?"

"You'll get your tires, all right — unless you go to jail. And you'll go to jail if you don't make good, or if you get caught!"

That afternoon Rowe and Luke Taylor sat for long in the car on the siding at Pancake, shades drawn tight to keep out the sun, electric fans doing their best with the air. Rowe talked rapidly, careful of sequence and the other followed him closely.

Later Jim Harris came in and the three talked. Before Jim rose to go, he said:

"This feeling against her works for you. I've never seen so much resentment. Public opinion sure is playing into your hands, Mr. Taylor!"

"Public opinion, hell!" snapped Luke. "I knew public opinion before you were born, Harris. Business is business. Sometimes it has to get a little rough, but don't try to fool me, Harris; don't try to pull any wool over my eyes."

With a close approach to confusion Jim made his exit while Phil Rowe covered his embarrassment, for his employer's scornful gaze had included him, by fussing with a broken cigar.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE new day dawned ominously, with wind in the west and acrid smoke making the early sun like a huge orange, which faded to a silver disc as it moved upward. Last evening Luke had ordered his secretary to bid Helen Foraker come to him and Rowe had returned from the telephone, chagrined and ill tempered.

"She won't come," he said hotly. "Wants to talk but insists on doing it at home."

"Wants *me* to come there, eh? Why?"

"Says she has to be there because of the fires all around." He flashed a covert look at the other. "I told her it was impossible for you to come."

"What in hell'd you say that for? Rowe, you're a damned fool. Wants me to come, does she? By God, I'll run that rabbit into her warren. Get a car! We'll be there in time to curl her hair for her!"

And so in the blue-gray dawn Rowe took the old man out of Pancake, toward the forest and the girl who had tossed restlessly through the night.

Since the day before yesterday she had been in turmoil. John Taylor, fighting for her, fighting with his fists, with high rage for her enemies in his face! It knocked her assurance. Could that fight have been a fraud? she asked herself, and for the moment hoped that it had been because such truth would save her from the humiliation of doubting that she had been justified in sending him from her house. If he fought for her now, she had been mistaken; she had

jumped at a faulty conclusion; the evidence which had seemed so weighty against him was not above question; she had been wrong when she sent him from her. Or he might have been her enemy and have broken with his conspirators — or he might actually be helping her for some unknown reason — she could not picture him, now, as a deliberate plotter against her well-being —

When she was in the worst of this bewilderment, Humphrey Bryant had telephoned, talking of other matters rather absently; then he had told her that Taylor was under arrest, that his arraignment had been put over a day. "They're fighting among themselves," he said as though, perhaps, he doubted that explanation.

Yesterday she had watched Luke Taylor in her forest, had watched his restless old face find peace; had seen him stop and touch a pine trunk with all the affection that a man could put into a gesture; had heard him thank his God for her forest — His hardness had melted there and inspiration had come to her.

Black Joe had come in from the mill with a message for Aunt May; she had only half listened to that but before he turned to go he said:

"They're holdin' young Taylor in jail, I hear — I told him," — with a twist of his head — "Jim Harris'd get him — I told him; he's got sand, he has, but not much sense. I'm going in tomorrow if it rains an' get him out."

He walked away and Helen tried to call out to him, tried to make herself beg for an explanation, but she could not, and she did not know whether fear of humiliation or fear that the light hope in her would be blasted kept her silent —

All night she tossed, hearing the clinking of Pauguk's

chain as the wolf dog moved restlessly as smoke kept her instinctive fear of fire aroused.

She was up before dawn, finishing breakfast as light and wind grew stronger —

John Taylor sprang from sound sleep in his cell. The sheriff was unbolting the door to bring in a plate of food.

"When are you fellows going to give me a chance to pay a fine and get out of here?" John asked.

"In a rush?" The sheriff tried to be jocose.

"I'm about as crazy to get out as Jim Harris is to keep me in!" the other burst out. "If I'm not loose today there'll be something bitter for a crowd of you to swallow!"

The genuineness of his anger shocked the officer.

"You'll be took care of," he said. "The judge'll get around about nine, I expect."

The men were going on patrol. Black Joe, glass in hand, descended from Watch Pine, shaking his head. It was no use; he could not see forty rods through the smoke.

Pauguk stiffened, ears cocked and then a car came through the murk and stopped before the door of the big house and Philip Rowe got out to confront Helen. He removed his hat and bowed stiffly; his bruised lips and swollen eye made him grotesque and the smile he forced made him hideous.

"Miss Foraker, Mr. Luke Taylor is here."

She looked at the old man, getting to the ground. He leaned heavily on his stick today; he was stooped and his clothing hung loosely about his withered frame. His thin lips were parted and he breathed rapidly, as though this were great effort.

Here stood the great Luke Taylor! Here stood this arch devastator, this man who had made waste of forests, this man who had been ruthless and cruel and greedy; but who yesterday had wept as he listened to a bird singing in Foraker's Folly!

"You may come in," she said, as though she conferred a measurable favor.

They entered the living room silently. Helen turned an arm chair to face her desk and stood by it while Taylor, still without speaking, moved slowly forward and seated himself stiffly. Then she turned to her desk and sat down. She had ignored Rowe completely; she rested her hands on the chair arms and looked directly into the cold blue eyes of the old man.

However, Rowe was the first of the three to speak.

He put down his hat and drew up a chair for himself. He was raging, but he covered that rage; his case was all but lost and he fought humiliation and anger to save what he might of the ruin of his hopes. He cleared his throat nervously.

"In our first talk, Miss Foraker, I outlined Mr. Taylor's wants. I tried to make it clear that we were willing to pay a very fair figure and that the terms would be such as would enable you to realize on your investment and your work."

Helen moved ever so slightly with a suggestion of weariness, and folded her hands as though this was something that must be endured.

"Since that time many things have happened which must be considered factors in the case. It is to be regretted that you have misunderstood my motives, and have seen fit to think that Mr. Taylor comes here

as an aggressive, unscrupulous enemy. He comes on a straight business proposition."

He hitched his chair forward, indicating that after this preamble they could get down to business. He started to speak, checked himself and rubbed his palms together, as if considering. But before he could proceed the girl spoke. Her voice was low and she directed what she had to say at Taylor himself, who sat eyeing her steadily.

"I have told Mr. Rowe that my forest was not for sale. Evidently, he does not yet understand. I did not ask you here today to talk of selling."

"Not to talk selling!" Rowe cried. "What then?"

Again he was ignored for Helen did not remove her gaze from Luke as she said: "It seems that I have few confidences from the public. Consequently, there are not many things for me to explain. Mr. Rowe," there was in the name the slightest amount of bitterness, "has indicated that I need help and that there is no help in sight. He is right, quite largely. That is why I wanted to talk to you today, Mr. Taylor. I need help. I want you to help me."

Luke's start was confined to the change in his eyes; they blinked once and in that blink their absorption gave way to amazement.

"To help *you?*" cried Rowe derisively.

Then for the first time the girl turned to him. "Yes, Mr. Rowe; you appear to understand."

"I don't understand at all! You say you are determined not to sell; yet you are asking Mr. Taylor for help!"

The girl looked at Luke as though she hoped he would speak, giving her an opportunity to put her proposal directly to him, not through Rowe; but the old man

sat with chin drawn against his chest. His eyes still showed amazement and in their depths was a gleam that might have been admiration — as he would have admired while he planned to undo a man who had braved his wrath. Still, he did not speak and after a moment Helen addressed Rowe.

"I don't want to sell. I want Mr. Taylor to give me the help I need so I will not be forced to sell. I have come to a parting of the ways. I can no longer go on with my present resources; the financial situation is against me. My property is not taking care of itself yet; obligations are due; I have suffered the loss of my water-power, which cuts off all my income and repairs mean an outlay of money at once."

"And you ask Mr. Taylor to help in this hair-brained adventure?"

"I ask his help in carrying my pine until the investment is ripe, so I may follow through a plan which has been followed for nearly fifty years and needs a few years more."

Rowe sat back with a whiff of amazement. He looked at Luke and smiled, but the old man did not respond. His eyes were still on the girl's face.

Rowe touched his bruised lips absently. "That's amusing," sardonically. "Quite amusing, Miss Foraker. Quite the most preposterous request I have ever heard made!"

"It is unusual, I understand. Mr Taylor seems to be my last chance. I — I don't care much about asking this of him," with a slight hesitancy.

"This is so amusing that it's interesting," said Rowe. "I take it you want a loan. How much — and for how long?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know!"

She shook her head. "Only in a general way. It depends on what happens to me and to the lumber market. I need thirty thousand dollars at once. That is to take care of a mortgage coming due and rebuild my dam and give me a small working capital. I may need as much more next spring; perhaps a greater amount. If my taxes are increased as the township officers have the authority to increase them under the present law, I will need help there. I will need loans from time to time until I can begin to make my regular turn-over — until I can start with a full annual cutting budget."

"A what? Oh, and then you *do* plan to cut this timber, sometime! When, Miss Foraker?"

"I can't tell you that exactly. It depends on market values and interest rates and how much capital I must put in — The cut begins when the stumpage value on approximately two hundred acres of timber is equal to the current carrying charges."

Rowe drew a hand back over his sleek hair. "Why the two hundred when you have ten thousand?" he asked. "You're sure of decent prices now and — you don't know how many more risks you will have to run in the future — risks and difficulties and unpleasant circumstances, Miss Foraker. Our proposition is to take over the whole block; we're not interested in a little fraction. Why the two hundred, if I may ask?"

"Because I'm trying to establish a forest business, Mr. Rowe, a forest *business* in which the annual income meets carrying charges and gradually amortizes the capital investment."

She waited. Rowe frowned. Luke blinked again. She sighed briefly, as though this bored her.

"A peculiar business," Rowe laughed, "that heads straight into bankruptcy for the sake of an abstract idea."

"Is it peculiar business to keep the capital invested *well* invested? Or to expect that the business should yield fair returns on the capital, Mr. Rowe? Is it unusual when the early period of a new business requires increasing investments with a growing burden of compounding interest, all of which are returned and multiplied when the business becomes established and its turn-over regular?"

"Theory, Miss Foraker. You're trying to apply very fine-sounding phrases to an enterprise which hasn't been proven. A real business does not refuse to sell its products when they're ready for market and when the firm is embarrassed by the demands of its creditors, you know."

"Nor does a factory sell its unfinished products, Mr. Rowe. My timber is merchantable, but it is not ripe. If you were a stock grower and owned a good calf which might bring ten dollars for veal, you would resent it if some one insisted that you sell when you knew that by keeping the calf until it matured, even though it cost you for care and feed and involved risk, it would bring ten or twenty times that price as a pure-bred cow. I'm in the position of such a stock grower. My volume growth of timber is increasing, increasing faster than the carrying charges, and real quality increment has just commenced to show. What are northern pine uppers quoted at now, Mr. Rowe? Then there is the increment of price due to the national timber shortage which sent white pine from

twenty-five dollars a thousand to over two hundred and fifty. What average annual per cent of increase does that represent? And do you see any signs yet that the up-curve is flattening out? And why is it unreasonable for me to consider these things in my forest business?"

When she began this argument Rowe's eyes had strayed out the window, as if watching for an arrival; he turned his head as though listening for an anticipated sound, but when she stopped Luke Taylor gave a slight twitching gesture to one hand and his secretary plucked at a crease in his pant leg and attempted a superior smile, unconvincing because of the confusion growing in his eyes.

"The head of the class, Miss Foraker," with an ironic nod. "But quite a long ways from our proposition. To get back where we started; what stumpage value *do* you place on the whole block?"

Helen sighed sharply and looked again at Luke. His cold eyes were on her, lighted with something that might have been interest, that might as well have been scorn.

"I have tried to tell you that this business is not for sale. No offer would be satisfactory, but I shall soon have timber for sale, about two hundred acres each year. I will want to harvest it myself, of course, because no one else would understand the job, any more than a stranger could successfully handle another man's farm without making mistakes. The stumpage value should come to around twenty dollars a thousand. Your cruiser has reported on that, beyond a doubt, and it will increase as the output becomes steady and special markets are developed."

"You can't get away from that idea of continuous output, can you? Honestly, considering everything, what

you've been through, what you're going through right now, do you think it practical?"

"I am as insistent on it as you are on scaring me. I know what you've been up to, you and your friends. You've backed me into a corner. There's no place to turn and that is why I have to come to you, Mr. Taylor, for help."

She turned to address Luke, hands on her chair arms, leaning forward eagerly. He did not change a muscle, a line of expression; he waited, and Rowe waited. Her voice was not so steady when she started in again:

"When we commence to turn over, Mr. Taylor, we should produce about four million feet a year — indefinitely. But from the time the cutting starts there will be an increasing amount for fifty years because each year, for fifty years, there will be another year's growth on the balance of the stand, until the last cut of the first rotation would be a hundred years old. That would be very nice pine, Mr. Taylor, even compared to the pine you cut yourself in Michigan —"

The old man's mouth worked briefly and he swallowed; otherwise, no movement.

"And during all those years there will be a steady pick-up in quality. Dense pine cleans itself fast after fifty years — and we will be near the peak of the national shortage, then. There should be prices, Mr. Taylor — big prices, to say nothing of the need it will fill — When the last block of the hundred-year-old pine was going through the mill the first block will be back again, fifty years old and ready, and from then on there would always be a fifty-year-old lot ready for the saw — always, Mr. Taylor — always — *every year!*"

She brought a fist down on her chair arm and shifted her position slightly. In the pause, Rowe stirred.

"And every year the interest keeps piling up, and the risks — You've really considered the risks, Miss Foraker, or do you just talk about them?"

"Risks!" she cried in contempt. "I've lived with risks since I can remember, Mr. Rowe. Lived with risks from fire to moles — and other underground workers! Because of those risks I must provide the forest with a margin of safety, as in any other business. My margin of safety is in the quality growth and increasing markets. If I cut too soon, I cancel my insurance of a future; I can't cut now and keep my capital intact. I will not do either because there is a chance for help left. Mr. Taylor is that chance. He could carry my pine until it is self-supporting; that will be only a few years, and then — forever after —"

She stopped speaking, for her voice had tightened.

Rowe spoke again: "Foraker's Folly! It seems to have been well named! Continuous crops from the same soil without putting anything back? That's considered bad business in agriculture. Anyhow, pine won't follow pine. Or will it, according to your unproven theories?"

The girl looked at him again, forcing herself to remain patient.

"I am reasonably confident it will, Mr. Rowe, and quite sure that the soil will hold up. You see, ninety-seven per cent of pine cellulose comes from the air instead of the soil. If you won't take my word, I can show you," gesturing toward the shelves of books. "Properly tended forest soil gets better for — well, for at least a good many years. Do you know of the Sihlwald at Zurich, for

instance, Mr. Rowe? Of course, the Swiss may be wrong; they've only been growing timber on the same land for six or seven centuries," looking down at her hands demurely.

"Pine trees produce pine seed and that seed will grow more pine trees. My books show that we netted over a thousand dollars on seed harvested and sold to the commercial nurseries last year. I hope that this item will almost offset the cost of growing our own seedlings and replanting when we're finally under way."

Rowe's color was rising. He was conscious that Luke was looking at him. He was out of his depth, challenging statements which concerned facts new to him; he was losing his temper. But it was win or lose, now! This was the thing for which he had come to Pancake: to cow this girl. If he lost in this interview, he would lose his standing with Luke and with that, all that he desired would go, as well!

"This gets better and better," he remarked sarcastically. "You are asking Mr. Taylor for help and you don't know how much you need or how long you will need it. And you're asking this because somebody has done something somewhere else. Do you actually know your capital investment, Miss Foraker?"

"Mr. Taylor may check my books. They are complete, from the time my father began."

"In due season, perhaps, should he have — any curiosity." He waved his hand, trying to be casual in his desperation. He could not stop, now. Luke was watching him, the eyes of the girl challenged him. He blundered on.

"Your whole proposition is hinged on higher prices and a purely hypothetical timber shortage. In six months

the lumber market will be busted flat. I suppose you'll resurrect the Lumber Trust and ignore the billions of feet left in the South and the thousands of billions out on the Coast. What about that, for instance?"

"There is timber — billions of feet. There was once in Michigan. Perhaps Mr. Taylor used to think there was enough here to last forever. Perhaps he had friends who moved into the southern pineries and who are junking their mills now and getting ready to move into the Pacific Coast States. The market may slump; everything is going to slump for a time; it's natural reaction —

"But the timber is going and in New England they're sawing box wood out of pine trees that stand in fields which were cultivated at the time of the Civil War. Your shoes, your clothes probably were shipped to Detroit in boxes made of that stuff. Why? Because it's grown on the ground and the manufacturers are tired of paying freight rates on material. Why, I can raise and sell white pine at Buffalo for less than the freight alone on Oregon fir and —"

"Oh, freight rates! A socialistic mess! They'll come down; and besides, you've just admitted that there *is* timber — timber in Canada and all sorts of places. Now let's quit this and get down to our proposition. Will you —"

Luke stirred and hitched himself nearly erect.

"Oh, shut up, Rowe! When you don't make a fool of yourself with your questions, this young woman does with her answers!"

A moment of silence while Luke glared at Rowe. To ridicule and curse had been habitual, but now there was something new in his face, a fresh bitterness, a disdain,

a fading trust, that made the other go cold. The old man turned to the girl, and his gesture marked the collapse of years of scheming and service and hope that Philip Rowe had erected.

"You've been talkin' a lot of moonshine!" Luke said sharply. "Like th' rest of your doddy generation — Moonshine! But you make a case, th' sort of case that'd convince a lot of old women!" He ran a hand over his chin and his eyes flashed.

"You need money all right. It'd do you no good to deny that and try to bluff me, but you've got your cheek, comin' to *me* for help!"

Helen's head was dropped forward a bit, arms folded. She did not flinch as he made the charge. Her eyes, very somber, gave him stare for stare. "You are the only man I know who can realize the value — and who has the money. That is why I come to you. I would rather go somewhere else — but there is no choice."

"You're high an' mighty for a begger!" he scoffed. "You're brazen!"

"I am only saying what I think, as you are."

He rubbed his chin again and his lips worked.

"And what makes you think you've got a chance with me?" he burst out. "I don't want to back you. I want this stuff myself. That's why I sent Rowe up here, to make a bargain. I come to buy somethin' an' you're in a pinch, where you've got to sell; I offered to do th' right thing an' by the Lord Harry you won't listen — but come askin' favors from me!" His brittle voice was louder.

"Yes, Mr. Taylor, that is it. I do not want to sell, so I ask you to help me past the point where I might be forced to sell."

He sat back, tapping the chair arms briskly with his palms. "You *have* got cheek! Cheek? — Never seen it before!

"You won't listen to me when I want to buy, but expect me to listen to you when you want my money — an' after you've filled that young cub's head full of moonshine an' turned him against his father — after I thought I'd found something in him!" He lifted his hand and a quick flush came into Helen's cheeks and Rowe, watching her, detected something that was almost fright in her expression. "I sent him up here, a worthless cub; he makes good, where I'd 've said nobody could make good. He makes a fine start an' for th' first time since he was a kid I was — proud of him. And then you pumped moonshine into him until his head's addled. He called on me for backin' in some pine deal and gets me all worked up! I send Rowe here to investigate and find that th' cub don't want to buy, but wants to invest in your damned moonshine!" He was gripping the chair arms now, leaning forward, and his eyes were very pale against the dark mask of his anger.

"He's so full of your theories that he don't even expect he'll have trouble in convincing me — a practical man. And then when he finds out I won't have it, that I won't back him, what does he do? He stands in my way, by damn! He fights his own father when he tries to buy this Pine! He tries to do me at every turn so 's to help you, and ends up in jail because he beats up my — my book-keeper!" He spat out the last words venomously as he glared at Rowe.

One of the girl's hands went slowly to her breast and she made as if to rise from her chair. Her lips were parted

and the flush which had gone into her cheeks drained until they were parchment white. "Not that," she said weakly.

"Just that!" The old man's voice was a rasp. "He's fought me to a standstill! He's fought me because you pumped him full of your damned moonshine, but that can't stop me — Nothin' can stop me now. I've had everything I've ever wanted until now. I want this Pine and you can't stop me!"

She had settled back to her chair and sickness swept through her — and a rebound of great strength — and then fresh dismay — His words rang in her ears as she drove back the tumult, crowding all the conflicting factors out of her consciousness, laying bare this one problem. She rose and spoke:

"You have had everything you wanted, Mr. Taylor? — Until now? — And so have I. But it happens now that we both want the same thing. I want it and you want it, but I am not going to let you have it, and you are going to let me keep it, safe — always."

"Eh?" He was stung by her confidence. "*I'm going to help you! How's that? What makes you think that?*"

"This," she said simply. "You think you have had everything you ever wanted. That is not so. You have missed the biggest thing, Mr. Taylor; you have missed contentment." She was holding to the edge of her desk with one hand to keep her body steady; she spoke slowly, so her voice would be clear; her heart seemed to have been stopped.

"I never saw you before yesterday, but I know a great deal about you. Men still tell stories of your camps.

I had a man here only two years ago who worked with you on the Saginaw. Your — your son has told me about you.

"Your — your bookkeeper, here, told me in our first talk that you wanted this pine, because — well, not for the money. You want it because it will take you back to those days when you were happier, when you thought you were contented —"

"Darned moonshine! — Moonshine, like the rest!"

"No, Mr. Taylor." She did not lift her voice beyond its low pitch. "My father felt the same way; all you men who logged off Michigan pine lands felt lost when the last drive went down — I know — I was a little girl with them. And I saw you, yesterday, walking in my forest, walking in Michigan white pine. I think I know something of how you felt —"

His eyes fell away from her face; then flashed back. She took a step nearer him.

"They're gone, the old Michigan stands, Mr. Taylor, but there's a new forest coming on, here — we're in the heart of it. If I should sell to you and you should run twenty million a year, which was big those days, but isn't now — Foraker's Folly wouldn't last long. But if we go through with my father's plan — you and I — we can cut four million and up a year — forever."

"Moonshine! It's —"

"No, it isn't a dream, Mr. Taylor!" voice lifting. "It's *real*! It's as real as those trees outside my house! The last faller hasn't cried, 'Timber!' for the last Michigan white pine! We haven't seen the last of it going down iced roads to the dumps; we haven't seen the Blueberry bank-full in the winter time with white pine logs for

the last time! We haven't seen the last drive; we haven't heard the last pine log going against a saw here in Michigan; we haven't seen the last pond full of them, floating fine and high — cork pine, Mr. Taylor — with the sun bringing on the resin blisters on them so you can smell it — as you can smell the new lumber in the yard — and the big pile of fine sawdust —”

She paused and the uneasy wind soughed in the tops outside. The girl smiled, lips tremulous, as though tears smarted at her eyes. “It isn't a big operation, Mr. Taylor, but it will go on and on *forever!* There'll never be a Michigan man who is lonesome for white pine who can't walk through a stand of it, who can't watch 'em creeping up the slide, who can't feel the corks in his boots biting into the bark — if he wants to — It could be wiped out in a very few winters, Mr. Taylor. I want it to go on forever —”

She clasped her hands lightly before her and looked down on him with that sweet, confident smile. She saw the amazement in his face, the mist in his eyes. She saw him swallow, and then he snapped: “Damn moonshine, I tell you! Damn —”

Outside, Pauguk whined sharply. A shout. A horse galloping. Black Joe ran past the house calling a question to the patrolman who rode out of the smoke.

“For God's sake get out there! It's south of the old cranberry marsh in the timber and comin' like hell. Somebody smashed the telephone so I couldn't call!”

For a moment the girl poised before Luke Taylor. Then fright came into her eyes and she ran out the door. Phil Rowe started and turned and smiled — as though he had suddenly remembered some pleasurable thing.

CHAPTER XXXIII

BOBBY KILDARE ran shrieking across the dooryard to the big bell and began ringing furiously. In the garage Joe and the cook lowered the platform of fire extinguishers to the car and clamped it fast. Helen was on the driver's seat, waiting for Aunty May who hurried toward her.

"Phone Raymer at the mill to turn out everybody. Keep Bobby ringing and Milt will hear the bell. Tell him to send all men to me on lot eighteen — eighteen — south of the old cranberry marsh. Remember that: Eighteen, south of the marsh." She spoke slowly and very distinctly.

"Have Milt get Sim Burns on the wire and make him come here with men. Threaten him if he tries to lie down. You stay by the telephone when he is through and get Humphrey Bryant and have him send help from Pancake, if we send word to you we need it.

"All ready, Joe?"

"Let her go!"

The motor spun; the exhaust roared in the small building; the car shot forward and careening drunkenly rounded the house, throwing sand from the ruts and rocking the chemical tanks on its platform. With throttle open to the last notch the girl, heart racing with her motor, tore into the murk, the smell of burning pine growing strong in her nostrils. They crossed the pole bridge that spanned the river with a bouncing and a terrific clatter, due west, then north, slowing on the turns,

into denser smoke with each rod traveled; to the westward again and Helen fancied she could feel the heat of burning wood in her face.

"There she is!" cried Joe.

The brakes set and the car stopped in twice its length.

They were on the ground in an instant. Beauchamp and Joe tugging at the chemical tanks, running forward along the north-and-south fire line and then plunging into the forest to meet the advancing flames. A muffled shouting behind them; a thwacking of a stick on flesh, and a patrolman galloped up, bringing his apparatus.

"Get in there, Thatcher," Helen said shortly. "There are three others. Take two tanks."

A brass cylinder in either hand the man sped away, the girl behind him. The flames had started from the western boundary of the forest and on this fire line, a half mile in, they could feel their heat, could hear the snap and crackle. The smoke smarted the girl's eyes as she ran forward; it bit her throat and lungs and nostrils.

The forest was a weird company of indistinct tree trunks, the nearest swathed in flowing smoke, those a rod away barely distinguishable. A figure moved before Helen, crouched, going slowly toward the north: Black Joe his tank upended and nozzle playing on the angry tongues of red flame licking along the ground, feeding on dead needles and duff, going swiftly up the stems of small brush, leaping here and there for a hold on a tree trunk, falling back, trying again—the spit of the chemical blotted tongues out, the duff yielded dense smoke instead of flame, the fire sputtered angrily as it was torn loose from its hold on firm wood—

She moved beside Black Joe without speaking, straining

her eyes, listening. She heard a shout from beyond and a voice lifted in quick answer. The tank sputtered and went dead. Joe ran back and came with the other fresh one he had brought from the car; but before it could go into play the flames that he had beaten down had found hold again. Their roots were deep in that pitchy duff and he was forced to fight a second time for ground he had already won.

The girl left him and went on. The fire was advancing from west to east, spreading north and south in a fan-shaped area as the wind drove it on. She passed Beauchamp, who coughed as he told her that he, too, had emptied a tank and was covering the same ground for a second time. She came on the patrolman who had reported the fire.

All along she could see those hungry, reaching tongues. One had found hold on a dead branch six feet up a tree and was waxing stalwart on the secreted pitch. She seized a stick and beat it out, shielding her face from the heat with the other arm — and ran on, to see flames crawling up other trees, like nimble devils.

She heard a horse snorting loudly as he came near with a cart of tanks and, a working idea of the size and progress of the fire in her mind, she stumbled back to join the fighters who gathered about.

"Joe, Thatcher, Beauchamp; you handle the chemicals. I'll refill. You," to the other patrolman, "bring in the empties and take out live ones. Make every pint count. It's hot and running fast."

As she tore the lid from the cask of soda and opened the water keg, she planned her battle; three men to fight, one man to carry. A tank was not good for more

than a hundred feet of fire front in this heat. Three hundred feet — She shook her head. She needed help!

Another patrolman brought his lathered horse to a stop.

"It's all in this block," Helen said, without stopping her work. "Take your apparatus straight ahead. You'll stay in this east-and-west line. The fire will be north of you and your job is to keep this flank from crossing the line. You'll have help as soon as I can spare men."

The man yelled at his horse. The frightened animal was trying to back and turn and had no terror of the whip. Helen seized the bridle and led him forward, then sprang aside as he lurched on. Her helper emerged. His eyebrows were gone, she saw. He peered close into her face, fright stamped on his features and stared so a moment before he gasped:

"They can't hold it. Soon's they get it knocked down — the wind — the wind throws her along again."

The crackle and pop of burning wood was louder, nearer, the heat more intense, smoke thicker — greenish, yellow smoke, coming in puffs that spread about her and swirled and clung to the ground and then shot upward — or rolled along among the trees.

Black Joe came on a run.

"It's hotter 'n th' hubs of hell! It'll go into the tops if we don't kill it — and up there once, she'll go clear to th' river!"

"I know, Joe. Listen!" From afar off a feeble, thin cry came through the confusion of heavier sounds: the wail of an automobile siren.

It rose and fell, approached and receded in the face of fire sounds, but it was constant and seemed to be shrieking a warning in words: "Git outta the way!"

We're a-comin'— we're a-comin'— we couldn't stop if we wanted to — we're a-comin'— a-comin'— *now!*"

"That's Raymer and help!" the girl cried and laughed excitedly.

They came clanking through the smoke, Raymer and Goddard, Thad Parker and four others from the mill. They clustered about the girl, but before they could question, she was giving orders. One by one she assigned them to their work, Goddard with a crew to backfire from the next fire line eastward, Black Joe to go on a horse and circle the entire burning area. Raymer to the northern flank. They scattered and Helen, relieved of actual labor, turned her car about and drove back a half mile to a vantage point.

The snapping became sharp reports, like pistol shots. A freakish wind, set up by the rising heat, eddied about, slapping downward and up, this way and that, scattering brands as it went. For a moment a strange silence, then the popping again. Along the line of advancing fire the men worked, shirts smoking as they played their chemicals. Their hair singed, their cheeks blistered; lungs became raw and eyes streamed water. They retreated slowly, always retreated. They could not advance, could not even make a stand. Checked here, the fire found an opening there and worked into fresh fuel; subdued in this place, it gathered strength elsewhere, and all the time it became more aspiring, leaping higher on trunks, clinging longer to dead branches, running up the lichen-covered bark, licking for the green needles, falling back, waiting, gathering strength and trying again. On the flanks the advance of flame was slower, the heat not so great, the smoke not so dense. They could hold the fire from

progress there — But that center kept on relentlessly!

From the tool cache Goddard brought his equipment and men ran along the first fire line to the eastward of the blaze, igniting the duff and brush until forty rods of fire worked backward against the wind slowly to meet the fire which came on toward it. Men paced the fire line, holding their tortured eyes open to watch for brands that might cross the strip and fall into the timber on the far side to start new fires. To combat this menace they carried wet sacks.

Another car arrived, driven by the clerk of Lincoln township, bringing more aid; men ran to the work on Helen's orders and the car drove off to summon others.

Black Joe came up on a panting horse. He slid to the ground and lifted his red, red eyes to the girl who stood in her car and gasped:

"It's a 'bug' fire! Somebody's set this on us!"

"Set it?"

"It didn't come in from outside, Helen. Somebody drug a lot of dry bresh in offen that hardwood clearin'. One man, by his tracks — must've worked all night. He tetched it off twenty rod from th' outside fire line — That's what made her hot from th' start!"

The girl fought down her rising rage. To yield to such emotion now would play into the hands of this incendiary. She must think of no yesterday, no tomorrow; she must think of one thing: this fire; on time, this hour! —

"Forget that, Joe! We'll get him later. Side lines going to hold? Back fire all right? Milt there? Where's the front of it now?"

He answered her briefly and mounted again but swung his horse back beside the car.

"If it crosses here," indicating the line where the back fire had started — "you've got Burned Dog swale to fight!"

"I know that, Joe — and we can't *let* it cross!"

"I wasn't tryin' to learn you nothin'," he said apologetically, searching her set face.

Centuries ago when glaciers gouged out this Blueberry country the ridges were laid in strange patterns. Burned Dog Creek, a very small stream, drained a thin ribbon of swamp in the depth of the pine. It ran nearly due east until, meeting the abutment of a ridge that lay between it and the river, it swung sharply to the northward. But from the face of bluff springs seeped and for two-thirds of the way to its pine-crested top the balsam, which lined the creek, grew — If fire should go down that swale, igniting the balsams it would run rapidly, it would shoot up the inflammable cover of that bluff and mount the ridge with a hold in the pine tops that could not be denied; and then it could sweep on to the river, perhaps even across the Blueberry itself, destroying utterly as it went.

If Goddard's back-fire should fail! They could make one more stand, true, but that next line of defense dipped through the first of the balsam itself and if living flame got that far their fighting this morning would have been in vain!

The draft of the conflagration sucked at the back-fire. It moved faster, burning clean as it went, its flame tendrils and smoke banners drawn against the wind by the increasing draft. The crackling had grown to a heavy mutter. The two ragged lines of flame drew nearer. At a hundred yards apart each moved as fast as a man would saunter;

at half that distance they reached for one another, fluttering, sweeping across the intervening space, gathering both speed and height. A dull, increasing roar of ascending air sounded beneath the pistol-like reports of burning wood; the yellowish, thick smoke rose as it might through a heated flue — Flame touched flame at the extreme point and that contact seemed to give the strength which swept the laggard portions of the lines forward even faster. A tongue of flame found hold in a pitch deposit on the side of a tree; the draft swept it upward, giving it hold, made it secure there. A long creeper of live fire whipped into the branches dragging heavier flame with it — There was a sound like a great, savage sigh of triumph and a sheet of fire rose from earth to tree crowns and with a ripping, tearing, wailing fury of sound the tops burst into flame —

Trees rocked and twisted in the force of the draft. A mighty column of smoke spouted into the heavens, rising straight up, seeming uninfluenced by the wind and from it rained needles and twigs and small branches, all blazing, and from it came sounds of terror, sounds that went straight through the reason of strong men and touched raw emotions that had been buried for generations. Fire, man's first friend, had turned into his raging enemy, mighty in its wrath, terrible in its manifestation of power.

Men dropped their tools and ran. Goddard raised his hoarse voice in command to call them back, but he could not be heard — they fled, scattering as the fire leaped the break and fastened itself in the tops of the trees they had sought to safeguard! Thad Parker ran down the line and would have gone on into the forest, heedless of all else except the impulse to escape this fiend, but Helen

Foraker caught him by the wrist and swung him about to face her.

"Stay here!" she cried, and shook him. "I need you. There's no danger to you and we've got to try again!— Won't you stay?" to another man, "And you? I need you!"

Others came up, singed, shaken men and assembled about the car as Helen started her motor. They recovered some of their balance when they saw that she was not afraid.

"Get aboard, all of you!" she cried and they scrambled up eagerly, for she was headed away from the monster that raged eighty rods from them —

She drove through the smoke, stopping at another tool cache, swinging into the next fire line, half a mile to the eastward. The men ran forward after Goddard, axes and saws and shovels ready for the new attempt. The fire which had leaped upward and swept onward with such initial savagery, hesitated when it entered the trees that stood above cool ground. No draft held it aloft there and a mighty draft dragged from behind. A puff of cooler air slapped downward, driving a point of the fire from the top in which it burned to the ground. It found hold in the duff about the trunk— The crowns about it burned out, the fire dribbled to the dead needles again. Once more men had their chance. The fire was again a ground fire, no longer breaking through the canopy of tops!

Along the new line of defense trees fell, tops into the forest. Axe and saw slashed and bit, leveling the outer rows to make the break from canopy to canopy wider — And to the windward of these axemen others again started fire to burn out and meet and check fire.

Burned Dog tumbled through the pine here and just before it reached the fire line its current slowed as it settled into the head of the swale, and the pine gave up to balsam and spruce.

Men worked like mad. Goddard drove them, tense and ruthless. Once a man hesitated and Milt struck him heavily, knocking him down, kicking him toward the work he had indicated. None noticed. The man got to his feet and went at the task, the frightful sound of advancing fire neutralizing his resentment. Black Joe was there, barking the oaths of rivermen as he drove the others into the work. The hot wind, rushing down the creek, bobbed the stiff balsams, lifted their branches up to expose the pitch blisters — The nodding, the beckoning of those trees, seemed to invite the visitation which would be their death.

Back in the face of the advancing flame where the chemicals had again been tried, men gave up. Human flesh and will could not stand before that blast. Unhampered, the flames leaped higher, ran faster before the wind, spread their front wider and their growing draft again picked up brands and flung them out over the heads of those who worked feverishly. Islands of fire appeared ahead of the main front. Smoke ascended from a dozen fresh points and men ran from place to place beating them out, but their strategy was disorganized, their forces scattered, efficiency lost.

"All hell can't stop it!" shouted Black Joe as he came up to Helen Foraker, who was dispatching fresh arrivals to relieve worn men. "It'll hit that balsam and go down the creek to the bluff. It'll go up that like an explosion!"

He started away. His last words echoed in the girl's consciousness, hammering at some hidden idea —

Explosion! — "Black Joe!" her voice was shrill and he wheeled. "If it goes up like an explosion, can't an explosion stop it?"

"Huh? What 's —"

"Dynamite, Joe! Dynamite!"

"Oh, God help you, Miss Helen! God help you," he cried, with a new excitement, the stimulus of a fresh hope in his voice.

A car was there, its owner begging for an errand. He had brought men from Pancake, men who had scorned and scoffed at Foraker's Folly, but fire closes breaches, belittles differences and those he brought were now at work; this man awaited the girl's word.

"Take Joe!" she said to him. "Push him, Joe!"

The man sprang into his seat, glad to obey her orders.

Across the pole bridge they tore, past the big house, on to a dugout in the river bank. Boxes of dynamite were tossed into the car, a coil of fine wire thrown in and, holding a box of percussion caps high, Joe swore as he ordered the other to drive back.

Helen left her post for she could do no good there. Men were wearing out, they were deserting sneaking away under cover of the smoke and she kept among those who remained, a soaked handkerchief over her mouth. The roar of the oncoming fire increased; it commenced to mutter again and the back-fire, feeling the pull of that hot draft, leaped and ate toward its kind —

A sucking sound, a flapping, like an immense flag in a heavy puff of wind, a long-drawn *wo-o-o-sh*, and a great eddy of fire and smoke was sucked upward and scattered.

It left the tops through which it had passed only singed but the brands it had lifted were snatched by the gale and swept along, falling, a thousand of them, into the balsam thicket!

A crackling followed, like a growing, harsh laugh. A million matches scratching; a thousand bull whips popping — A ripping, a tearing — The swale was afire and the flame, bursting from great puffs of thick, greenish smoke, exploding, leaping, swept on down the creek, melting all that stood in its path!

"Get Raymer!" Helen shouted, mouth close to Goddard's ear. "Send him to the top of the bluff — and come yourself —"

Again she sped with her car through the smoke, reckless of others who might be in her path. She went up a rising road, hot ashes falling about her and stopped, leaping out, calling aloud to Black Joe.

As well have whispered! From the crest of the ridge she looked down through the smoke-screened balsams sixty feet below to see the inferno beyond, sending up its torrent of triumphant sounds: the rip and tear of flame banners frazzled out by their own heat, the popping, the snapping, now and again a sound like a gun-shot; a mighty, breathy wailing — and all against the background of savage roar!

Joe was on his knees, driving his crow bar into the brink of the bluff. A half-dozen others were doing likewise, making parallel rows of holes among the roots of those pines that grew above the ladder of balsam tips on which that fire would mount.

Others took up the work and Joe, relieved, ran back to tear open the boxes of powder. His hands trembled and he had no ear for Helen. Now and then he glanced

into that furnace blast from below and his lips moved soundlessly — Goddard joined him.

Thad Parker ran up, gibbering, an axe in his hands.

"It'll burn us all!" he screamed. "We can't get out!"

Some one grasped and shook him, but Thad would not listen. His eyes were those of a mad man and the cries that came from his throat grew inarticulate. He bit at the man who held him, tried to lift the axe and swing it at his captor. The other staggered away and Thad turned and fled into the smoke —

Joe and Milt fitted caps to the dynamite and Raymer came up on a gasping horse. He caught the idea at a word from Helen and began setting wires. It was delicate work, painful work under those conditions. Time sped!

The cars were backed out and down the grade, but Helen gave no heed. She followed closely the men who were making this, her last big play. The greasy sticks went into the ground, one by one, tamped carefully in their holes along the brink. For two hundred yards they were planted and when the last cap was being adjusted the furnace blast from below tore at the crowns of the pine trees above them with the strength of a tornado.

The girl was atremble as she settled herself beside Joe and the coil box behind a tree trunk, prostrate on the ground, screening her face with her hands from the heat. She could not speak, could not think, could hear nothing but that crescendoing roar from below. Black Joe crouched on his knees, skin blistering through his shirt, peered over the brink. He saw a streamer of flame leap upward through the broiling heat waves, wrenching at balsams as it seared them, saw another

fork stab out, saw a solid wall of fire flutter and hesitate and then wrap about the topmost balsams, clinging there a split instant before it made its last leap — its leap into the pine above.

Through that bedlam of terror, Helen's voice cut like a knife: "*Now Joe!*"

She was thrown from her knees to her face because as that sheet of flame gathered itself for its jump into the pine tops, the whole bluff belched out to meet it! A thousand tons of loose sand were flung into the face of the fire. Outward and up and down, it struck, more vicious than the heat in its path, more powerful than the flame. Trees on the brink rocked as the root holds that had endured throughout their life gave way. They swayed and twisted and three, one after the other, toppled over into that smoking maw! —

Smoking maw! The flame was gone. As a puff of breath will extinguish a candle, so that blast had blown life from the fire. For yards, the balsam that had blazed was smothered with dry sand. For rods, the fire was stripped clean from wood where it had found hold. The point of the fire was broken, gone. It was no longer in the balsam tops, no longer a menace to the pine above. It had consumed as it went; there was nothing left in the path of that which had escaped the full force of the explosion to feed upon. It would burn for days, perhaps, but it was down there, disorganized, where men could seize upon and fight it!

"Oh, God A'mighty!" cried Black Joe. "If Paul Bunion could 'a' saw that!"

"Herd back that crew!" choked Helen. "We can hold it, now!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THAD PARKER had fled frantically from the monster that unbalanced his mind. Axe clutched in his hands he raced through the forest, looking back now and then as though fearful of some terrible presence peering over his shoulder, tripping, stumbling, falling, rising and keeping on, breath making sounds like those from a distressed animal. He came out into a fire line and followed it, turning at an intersection. His flight became a feeble flounder and once when he fell he did not try to rise until he had crawled a dozen yards, clinging to his axe, whimpering. He crossed the bridge and followed the ruts toward the Foraker house. He did not hear Bobby and Bessy crying, did not heed the sharp questions flung at him by Aunt May, did not see Luke Taylor standing at a corner of the building, leaning on his stick and staring into the smoke. He went on along the road that led to Seven Mile, away from the demon that was ever at his heels.

A car rounded a curve and bore down upon him. Parker stopped, swaying in the middle of the road, eyes fast on the figure at the wheel which grew rapidly distinguishable as the car came through the murk. The motor was four lengths away. Its horn sounded impatiently. The man at the wheel made a gesture for Parker to step out of his way and then reached for his emergency brake, bending low and cursing as Thad gave no ground.

Parker moved, but did not step aside. He lurched forward. He swung the axe above his head thrice, as a hammer thrower whirls his weight. He let it go and doubled quickly, with a shriek of crazy mirth. Glass of the wind shield splintered explosively. Wilcox, beside the driver, cried out. Bert Wales and Wes Hubbard, in the back seat, threw up their arms against the glass slivers — then rose and leaned forward.

Jim Harris made no sound. His hand retained its grasp on the brake and he sagged forward over the wheel, a great, limp hulk; the axe dropped to the floor and the purpling patch behind his ear sent out its first thin ooze of blood. The others lifted him out of the seat as a roadster stopped behind them and Dr. Pelly, Humphrey Bryant and John Taylor got out and gathered about the prostrate Harris.

There was little blood, but Harris' breathing was fast and heavy and as the physician, kneeling on the sand, touched the bruise with light fingers they saw the broken bone stir beneath discoloring skin.

"Isn't that bad, doctor?" Wilcox was the first to speak and Pelly nodded.

"As good as dead."

The smoke-laden wind sobbed in the trees above them. For a moment there was no other sound and then Thad Parker's weak, faltering voice rose in a thin wail, half fright, half triumph.

"Dead! Dead? And I killed him? Before God, I killed him with my hands! I killed him, and he killed my wife, my hope — I — I —"

He whirled and would have run again, but hands clutched him. He struggled and shouted and laughed.

"Get him into a car and to town," said the physician.
"Stark mad!"

Wales and Hubbard led Thad away and sat beside him on the cushioned seat, holding him there, as he leaned forward and whispered.

Philip Rowe came running from the house and old Luke Taylor himself moved down the road to join the group. A third car stopped and five men got out.

And one more, trundling an ancient bicycle through the forest, halted and made as if to draw back when he came into view of those others. But he did not go back. Charley Stump stood there, stroking the bent handle bars. The group about the unconscious figure shifted; Charley could see Jim Harris' face. He left his safety and moved forward timidly. He stood behind them, listening; he saw the doctor shake his head hopelessly; he heard young Wilcox mutter as he turned away. Charley dropped to his knees, hands clasped, staring down into Harris' face.

"Jim?" His husky voice rose uncertainly. "You ain't dead? Jim? —" He looked about, bewilderment in his pale, witless eyes. "He ain't goin' to die is he?" in appeal to the doctor. "Jim can't die now, doc, can he? — He *was* goin' to give me tires." He looked anxiously from face to face. "Tires for my safety— Jim, you can't die, Jim!" He lifted trembling, blackened hands and looked about, at Pelly, at Rowe, at Luke Taylor —

A movement, and young John stepped through the group and there was that in his face and manner which was electric, which made men wait for him to speak, there in the smoke of fire and the shadow of death.

"Tires, Charley?" he asked. "He was going to give you tires for *what?*"

On that question the old man rose. "Nothin'," he whimpered. "He wasn't going to give me nothin'!"

He started to edge away, but John stepped before him, stooping to stare close into his face.

"Yes he was, Charley. Tell these men what you did to earn those tires!"

"No, no!" trying to tear his eyes from that insistent gaze.

The old man stared about, sniffing, breath very fast, eyes hunted. He looked at John again and shook his head, but there was no conviction about the gesture and as Taylor started to speak he cried out:

"Oh, I didn't want to! He made me — said I'd go to jail if I didn't set that fire." A stir; added tension, as the group became more compact.

"And what else? That's only a part of it. What else, Charley? Where were you the night the logs burned, the night the dam went out?"

"Oh, I didn't — he made me! — he said I'd go to jail! He told me I would if I didn't set fire to her logs an' drive spikes in some an' blow up her dam. He told me that!" He looked down at the unconscious man at his feet and clasped trembling hands. "He made me!" throwing those hands wide for mercy. "I didn't want to, but he made me — he — he —"

Charley looked about again as his voice died to a whisper. His roving gaze set itself on Phil Rowe's face. The man quailed and started to move away.

"Hold on, Phil!" It was Taylor again and after a moment: "What else, Charley? Who else threatened you?"

Slowly one of the withered arms rose, an unsteady, gnarled finger half pointing. The accusation came in a half whisper.

"Him!" halting the finger to indicate Rowe. "He come th' first time — they both told me I'd go to jail if I —"

"It's a lie! He's crazy!" Rowe's denial, sharp and panicky, broke the tension. Men moved.

"It is no lie!" Taylor elbowed through them to be near Rowe. "You've gotten away with your last lie, your last piece of blackmail in this deal, Phil! Do you think I've been asleep? I've been just a lap behind you for days, you rat!"

Humphrey Bryant moved to where he could see John's face.

"I've got enough on you Rowe, to keep you busy from now on! Harris, there, may be lucky —" John looked about, breathing deeply in anger and saw Henry Wales and Wes Hubbard staring at him from the car, where they held the mumbling Thad. "And may be others will wish they were dead before I'm through!"

His eyes ran over the faces before him and came to rest on his father's. His shoulders slacked and he shook his head rather sorrowfully. "These are the things you have done," he said, spreading his hands. "This is why I have had to fight you."

His anger was gone; he looked pityingly at his father. For a moment their gazes clung, the old man's sharp and defensive — before something faded in his eyes. He looked from his son to Charley Stump who stood shaking with fright and it seemed as though between the two was more than the bond of age: the communion of trouble,

of guilt. Luke caught his breath as though to answer. But he did not speak. He half turned to confront his bookkeeper and then moved away, walking slowly, cane thrusting deep into the sand.

There was shifting, voices lifted; questions, oaths, excited laughter. Humphrey Bryant's hand went out and grasped Taylor's arm, clenching there tightly in a pressure which meant all, but he only said: "We came to help, and we're wasting time — now."

They moved, starting for their cars. And then a heavy detonation broke through the forest, balking the very wind, it seemed. They halted and faced its direction.

"Dynamite!" said somebody. "Let's get on!"

CHAPTER XXXV

It was late afternoon. All day the men who took orders from Helen Foraker had held the fire to the limits set down by the great blast. It burned briskly, hotly, but it was within their grasp and could not get away. The wind blew steadily and there was still danger in letting up until above the shouts and the snap of burning wood, the moan of trees that had been saved, came a heavy shaking boom of thunder. Through the thick smoke scattering rain drops fell, sending up little puffs of dust in the fire line. The wind dropped, the thin shower abated, stopped, and then with a fresh gust it came in a hissing, drenching torrent with lightning gashing the murk and thunder ripping open new clouds heavy with moisture. In ten minutes the ruts of the road ran water.

Drenched, her face streaked with grime, eyes smarting, weak from effort and strain, the girl entered her kitchen. Aunt May met her in the doorway.

"You're a sight!" she cried. "But this rain'll fix it, an' I'm glad you're here!" Helen took off her hat wearily and made no response. "He's in there yet," gesturing toward the front room.

"He? — Who?"

"That old devil!" eyes snapping. "I heard what he had to say this mornin'. He's stayed here all day. All durin' the fire he had Injun kids from th' mill running

back an' forth to tell him about it, givin' 'em his dirty dollars!"

Helen's face showed amazement through its weariness.

"I told 'em both to go, but he won't. He made that there Rowe go out and set in th' car in th' rain. He's mad at him, called him awful names! I tried to make him go, too, but he just said he'd go when you come. You'd better send him away, Helen; he makes me uneasy!"

The girl opened the door and looked into the other room. It was dark, like the last of evening twilight. Lightning played through the damp shadows and the roar of rain was terrific. Luke Taylor was in the chair she had drawn out for him that morning. He seemed more shrunken, more feeble as he sat far down on his spine, knees bent sharply. He was not aware that she was there until she stood beside him; then his hands which had been tapping the chair arms stopped upraised. The girl did not speak and Luke rose slowly, peering close into her face as a protracted flicker of lightning showed it in sharp relief.

"That old she-devil tried to drive me out," he said. "Maybe I've got something like that coming, but I wouldn't go — not for her. I've turned hell loose on you, I guess. From what I hear you've got a long story to listen to." He paused and his lips worked.

"You're full of moonshine," he rasped. "This is all damned nonsense, but you're makin' a go of it! You ain't got brass or cheek, like I said — just nerve — nerve!" He paused once more and still she did not speak.

"That matter you spoke to me about, that money you need — it's all nonsense, all moonshine! When you got to have it?"

She was numb; her knees were giving; she said flatly: "Now — soon — within ten days."

He sniffed. "I'll take a chance with you; I'll invest in a little moonshine — because you've got a nerve, and because you — because you're makin' a go of it!" He said that last as though the words hurt him, as though it was gall to admit her success. "I'll let you have the thirty, and I'll fix it so's you can get more — when you need it; *whenever* you need it. But I've got to get a new book-keeper first!"

She closed her eyes. She heard him grumbling more as he buttoned his coat close.

"Oh, I thank you — I thank you —"

"Don't thank me!" he snapped. He was at the door, opening it, to let the roar of rain and forest in on them. "You get it —" he moved back a step, "on one condition."

She nodded.

"An' that is that you'll let me come up here when I damn please — an' listen to 'em talk — an' listen — You're full of moonshine, but maybe you're right — about that four million a year —"

Something like a catch of breath checked him. He turned abruptly and went out into the rain. She saw him crawl through the curtains of the car, saw the white face of Phil Rowe as he started the motor. She turned to the mantel and lifted her face to the shadowed photograph of her father.

"All over," she whispered, and laughed shortly. "Saved — Foraker's Folly is respected — We've won father! We've —"

Thunder crashed, the rain abated, as though for

breath, and came anew, the downpour rising in spume from the sod outside.

"Won? — Oh, father, I've lost!"

It was there that Aunt May found her, hands clasped, staring blankly before her. She was not crying, had not cried; it would have been better so; the suffering in her face would not have been so terrible had it found the relief of tears. The older woman stopped shortly.

"Helen! What is it?"

But she needed no reply. The old arms which for years had gestured only in irritation went about her hungrily; the old voice which had been so sour and sharp whispered softly in her ear. Helen turned and put her arms about the woman's neck and put her head wearily on a bony shoulder.

"There; there, I heard what he said. It's all over. You've come out on top of th' heap!"

"Oh, Aunt May — it is over — I drove him away; I didn't trust. I didn't take happiness — when it came — He's fought for me even when I suspected him — and I can't ever look into his face again —"

They sat down together in the big chair, Aunt May holding Helen on her lap, talking gently to her, tears in her own eyes, trying to provoke tears for the girl. But Helen talked in short, stiff sentences of her helplessness, the emptiness of her triumph. She had won her big fight but she had lost the joy of life.

The last light faded. Rain continued, a veritable cloudburst. Helen went to her room and bathed and dressed, cleansing herself mechanically. Downstairs

Humphrey Bryant waited for her, waited with serious old eyes, leaning downward in his chair, tapping a foot rhythmically. He had so much to tell!

Night.

A lull in the rain.

Aunt May hung up her dishpan and draped the clean cloth over it. When she had wiped her hands she wiped her eyes.

She stood a long time in the doorway, peering at the lights in the men's shanty where a grimed crew talked of that day's fight and of Helen Foraker. A figure moved outside.

"Hey!" she called, in a cracking voice. The figure paused. "Send Joe here."

He came, scuttling through the fresh torrent and paused on the step and looked up at the woman with shock in his eyes.

"Black Joe, come in here!" she said impatiently.

He stepped inside, incredulous; for the first time in two decades she had addressed him!

"You've been wrong," she said. "You've been wrong for twenty years, you stubborn old devil! But I've had a lesson today—I—" brushing angrily at her eyes. "I've saw what misunderstandin's lead to. You're wrong, but I give in, Joe. That's a woman's way; to give in, to yield, to take the blame. But I'll do it. I ain't a body to let things run along until they get serious!"

His face grew alive with amazement, with hope. He stared at her as she dabbed at her eyes with an apron corner.

"Well, you old fool, ain't you *ever* goin' to speak?" she cried.

"May? — May?"

Awkwardly he put a hand to her shoulder and her arms went about him.

For a long time they stood in embrace, hearts racing as they pumped out the bitterness and brought in new life, new hope.

CHAPTER XXXVI

It was the second day after the fire. All yesterday it had rained, but at evening, just as the light was fading, clouds broke and a crimson sunset touched the trees with a blaze of jeweled glory.

This morning had dawned fair, the air was clean from the great fall of rain, wind came in from the northwest, brisk and cool, dazzling white clouds sped across a dazzling blue sky. Only the river was unclean; red and roiled and high, it rushed savagely down its course, swollen beyond precedent.

In Pancake Jim Harris lay in the Commercial House, swimming back to half-consciousness. Dr. Pelly had been constantly at his bedside since the operation. This morning he left, to go home and sleep.

In the office of the hotel he met Humphrey Bryant.

"How's the boss of Blueberry County?" he asked, with a wan grin.

The editor's tongue roved his lips.

"Well, Rowe's out on bail and half the supervisors are scurrying around trying to find out where lightning will strike next." He chuckled and sobered. "How is he?"

The doctor slipped a morsel of plug tobacco into his mouth and winked. "Better'n a hypo, Hump.

"Jim? Well, he's a sick man, but since yesterday I've begun to think that Pelly's a damned good surgeon." He spit at a cuspidor and a smile of pride wrinkled his face. "Another thing, Hump, I'd rather see a live stinker

taking his mortal and certain medicine than a dead one going to a hell fire that's largely theoretical!"

They went out together.

"Thad?" asked Pelly as they parted. "He'll clear up all right, so far's his mind goes. His heart though — you can't mend broken hearts like we can a busted skull — That's one reason I want Harris to get well — I'm a vengeful cuss, I guess."

Helen was at her desk, busy with figures — ostensibly. A letter written in Luke Taylor's scrawl was before her, paper limp from much handling. She read his promises of aid again and looked out the window and down the road as she had been looking for an hour, ever since John Taylor telephoned from the mill.

"I am coming for a final settlement," he had said. "The last car of lumber will go out tonight."

His final settlement! With all the relief that should have been in the girl's heart there was no rest. She had won; with Luke Taylor's backing there was no chance for her to lose now; she had put herself into a pinch on a theory; fire had laid waste to a full section of her timber. But there would never be incendiarism again, there would be no lack of working capital to tide her over until Foraker's Folly could function —

And yet there was only pain reflected in her face. She saw him coming down the road, walking slowly. He rapped and she opened the door for him. Confusion was on each and after the greeting they avoided looking at one another.

"Here is the statement from the mill," she said. "Is that right?"

He glanced at the totals.

"Right," he said, and drew out a check book.

He wrote slowly, painstakingly, as though it required effort to hold his hand steady. She watched him, with her heart high in her throat, hampering her breathing. The number — the date — the amount in script — in figures — his name — to the last period.

That was all. It was all over, now, for he was handing the check to her and rising, reaching for his hat. She looked at the slip of paper but could not read.

"That concludes our contract," he was saying, "That and my thanks —"

They faced one another. Her eyes went to his beseechingly.

"Thanks? My thanks are due to you," she said.

"No, I — I feel as though I were testifying in a revival. You have done a great deal for me. I came up here a — I didn't amount to much. I have learned this: that I know very little; and perhaps that is the first step in finding out things.

"I think you are the biggest person I have ever met," very humbly, and almost shyly, as though his words were presumptuous. "You have opened my eyes, you have set me straight.

"I made you so much trouble. I didn't mean to, but it was because I was ignorant and didn't know it. I'm so sorry." He paused and flushed as he mustered his courage. "I was presumptuous. I — I aspired to things that were quite beyond me."

He was letting her out easily, he was doing his best to cover the hurt that her error had caused them both! He was going now. She was conscious that he moved toward the door as though in haste. She followed.

"It was I who made the mistake," she said. "I — Anything that menaced my forest menaced me. I couldn't see — beyond that pine."

They were outside, the girl on the bottom step. He was going out of her life because once she had driven him away unjustly. She looked up at the pine trees which seemed so inconsequential now, to have so little meaning. He was denying what she had said, he was humbling himself to make her suffering easy.

His hand was outstretched and she looked at it vaguely and placed hers in it.

"Good-bye," he said. "Good-bye and good luck."

She could not speak. It was an affront to beg forgiveness; she had done the unpardonable; what she had today he had given her; what he was taking out of her life — she was to blame for that.

"Good-bye," she said.

She could not see his face twitch as he turned away. She stood looking after him, holding her hand outstretched as he had released it.

Pauguk at the end of her chain whined and bared her fangs.

Helen turned into the house. It seemed that there was no warmth in her body —

Milt Goddard, working on the motor of her car, watched. He was at a distance, could not hear their words, but he could see their faces and their postures. That was farewell to them, but the big woodsman knew that it was no farewell. He saw that the impulse which could never be shattered so long as life endures was in their hearts. He knew that though John Taylor was disappearing down the trail that skirted the fringe of swamp and made a

short cut to the mill, he was not leaving Helen Foraker. Taylor was gone, but he would be back — that, or the girl would follow him down that trail some day, to the ends of the earth if necessary; she was that sort —

He dropped his wrench. The screen door slammed behind Helen. The wind lulled. Pauguk was whining, straining, eyes on the trail Taylor had taken.

For a long interval Goddard stood there. He tried to resume his work, but could not. The rage in his heart grew unbearable and after a time he moved away toward the house, going slowly, silently, on the balls of his feet. The wolf dog turned a quick look at him and glared back at the way her enemy had gone. He spoke softly to her, snapping his thumb. He grasped her chain, letting it slip through his fingers as he advanced. His hand rested on her back and his fingers fumbled at the snap.

The wolf was free! She was starting forward, crouching, bewildered by this liberty. She dropped her nose to the ground, she went forward, at a walk, at a trot, she reached the edge of the pine; stopped, circled, started on; the trot gave to a gallop and then through the forest echoed the long-drawn hunting cry of her forebears.

Inside the house, a movement, an exclamation. Helen Foraker appeared in the doorway. She saw Goddard, the chain in his hands, and as she cried out to him that long, curdling cry came again, fainter, reverberating through the trees.

“Milt! What —”

Guilty fright swept his face. “He’d ’ve come back,” he said. “He’d ’ve come back an’ you —”

“Milt, she’ll kill him! — You murderer!”

She started toward the trail, calling the dog breathlessly

and stopped and faced about. Goddard was running frantically away from her, looking over his shoulder, stumbling across the nursery, seeking the shelter of cover, of distance.

Again the hunting cry — and again, more distant, fading away.

"Oh, God help me!" the girl cried. "I can't let her — I can't —"

And then she knew that while her voice and reason had said farewell to John Taylor her heart expected his return. But now — death sped on his trail!

She looked about wildly. An unrooted tree, caught in the current, was floating past and her eyes followed it with strange fascination as it sped in the white foam. It was going that way — the way he had gone —

She did not cry out again but leaped down the bank to where her canoe lay, bottom up. She lifted it in her slender arms, made mighty by that danger. She dropped it into the current; she dipped the paddle deep. The bow shot out and swung downstream, and kneeling in the bottom, sending the gunwale to the water's edge with every stroke, she drove forward, speeding before the speeding flood.

The trail Taylor had taken kept close to the river for a distance, then swung sharply to the left, shirting a widening area of swamp; for half a mile it circled, edging back toward the stream, coming out at an old rollway and then holding straight through the timber toward the mill as the river swung away.

That was her one chance; to beat the wolf to the landing. If she should fail in that she would be behind them and helpless — and Taylor would be helpless before

the savage fangs of that animal. She passed the floating tree, left it behind rapidly, sending her canoe forward with all the skill at her command, with all the strength which fear gave her body. Water boiled about the bow, deep eddies fell backward from her frantic paddle to be swallowed in the froth of the eager current.

She swept down a straight stretch of stream, between ranks of reeds and spires of drowned cedar. Far to her left was the path Taylor had taken, far to the left of her raced Pauguk — How fast? How far? She could not reason, could not calculate. Two days ago she had been keyed to great danger, to great activities. She had been able to think then, with great clarity, great rapidity but the thing at stake that day was her property, her pride, her devotion to her father's ideal. Then it had been timber and its related possessions. Today it was a man and her heart at stake — and there was no ability to think or plan. Her breath was fast and loud in her throat. She prayed brokenly —

She approached a jam, where brush and snags had lodged. She crossed the current toward the opening where water boiled through. She cried out when she saw the stout broken branches of a dead tree in the froth, reaching up to tear the bottom from her canoe. She tried to stop, to back, to make land, but could not fight the pull of the current. She felt the impact, saw the bottom of her frail craft bulge as it struck the half submerged tree; saw the bulge run backward toward her, felt the hard pressure of the snag against her knee — and she was through, gasping, cold — but safe, and only a trickle of water coming through the scratched skin of the canoe —

Time! Time! The current seemed to lose its swiftness. Her canoe lagged; she roused herself to even greater effort and still her progress seemed sluggish. The muscles of back and shoulder were tearing loose under the terrific strain so she changed sides with her paddle and the change helped for a moment — and then she moved on as if propelling an awkward craft in dead water.

She could not realize that she swept past the banks in a magnificent rush; did not know that she was driving that canoe as it had never been driven before; did not understand that, roused to this pitch, all the savagery of the current was in her favor, shoving her, making her skim with incredible speed.

On the far side of the swamp John Taylor walked rapidly, hands driven deep into his pockets, head thrust forward. His mind did not function; it was numb, plastic, and he was conscious only of the heaviness of spirit, the hopelessness that had been on him — forever, it seemed. There had been no glory in his bringing Rowe and Harris and the others to answer for what they had done; there had been no sense of reward in knowing that he had thwarted the menace which he had brought upon Helen Foraker. He owed her that much — and more; so much more that he could never balance the account.

He was going away, he knew not where; he would begin again, with a new sense of values, a better balance, the caution which makes men stable. But he had no heart or strength to plan. He wanted only to be away and forget —

Far behind him came the wolf dog. Her eyes were very bright, her tongue lolled as excitement fevered her blood. Ever since that day when Taylor had struck her the impulse to hunt him down and make him pay had been

strong when her nostrils told her that he was near. And now she was free, for the first time since puppyhood, and her senses were functioning in her initial hunt.

She was unschooled in trailing. She lost the easy scent a dozen times before she understood that eyes could help as well as nose and that birds and rabbits which had crossed the trail were of no moment. She had started out at a gallop; her pace slowed to a restrained trot; she ceased leaving the scent of the man; she went faster again; her voice lifted in greater assurance. She became confident, as instinct shaped itself. She broke again into a lope, racing on silent feet along the trail. Her fangs dripped slaver and her breath came in eager hoarseness, for the scent was stronger, in the air, now, as well as on the earth. She was closing for her vengeance!

Out in the river Helen rounded a sharp bend where the current flung itself at an unyielding bank, water boiling as she kept her broaching canoe from the smart eddy against the land. She straightened away and height loomed before her, faced with yellow sand — Along that landing passed the trail.

She cried out again for time — Or was she now too late? Had he passed? Had the wolf passed, too? Were they even then on combat somewhere yonder?

A mist dimmed her eyes and she shook her head to clear them, for she could not waste the movement of a hand. She rode high in the canoe, now; her stroke was ragged. The rollway rushed at her. She lurched forward as the bow touched the sand and the stern swung downstream. She stumbled into the water and floundered up the bank, heedless of her canoe which went on down with the current.

She struggled up the sand bluff, fighting for strength, mounted the overhanging rim of sod at the top, paddle in her hand. The trail was there, pitted by yesterday's deluge.

And a man's footprints, fresh — and none else! She heard her voice screaming for him — And then heard another voice, that hunting cry, coming down the wind. She had been in time — ! She started forward as the wolf appeared, racing toward her through the cool shadows.

"Pauguk!" she cried. "Pauguk!"

The animal's sharp nose lifted, her bloodshot eyes met the girl's. The lope dropped to a trot; she faltered, swung off —

"Pauguk! Come here!"

For an instant it was as though her command had struck through the roused impulses of the animal, as though Helen's control through years of captivity would hold now. In that fraction of time the wolf hesitated, one forefoot lifted, nose quirking, and then the fangs which had been covered in that brief period bared again and a ragged snarl of defiance came from the throat.

The dog stiffened, gathered and with a roar rushed toward her mistress to pass between her and the river and be again on that hot trail.

She came on, as the girl ran to head her off, gathering speed swiftly. And then the paddle swung hastily and the blade came down on the creature's head; it slivered and was useless as implement or weapon but it had turned the animal, swung her about and though she scrambled, raging against the impetus of the blow, she went over the rim of sod, down into the sand.

She struck her forefeet down stiffly, gasping as she

fought against the slide and turned on the soft footing of the slope.

She faced about, raging, clawing to scramble upward, and as she made her first lunge a shout came to them from down the trail and John Taylor, arrested by Helen's cry, ran through the trees. All sounds from the wolf ceased; all her strength went into those swift short leaps upward. Her eyes showed an orange glare, froth gathered on her lips and hate was there not only for the man, now, but for the girl.

Helen hurled the broken paddle at the wolf and missed. She drew back, screaming a warning to Taylor.

The head of the animal appeared above the rim. She raised herself on her hind legs to scratch with paws for the hold that would bring her to their level, and then Helen, backing in fright, stumbled over the dead branch of a pine. It was as long as her body, as thick as her arm.

"Stay back!" she cried to Taylor. "Stay back!"

Pauguk found hold with her paws. One hind foot clawed for added grip. She strained, head flung back, froth on her breast. She raised herself and quivering with the effort to hold her balance, she heaved forward and was up, turning, drawing her haunches forward for that last rush.

The tough branch lifted high, poised, and driven by all the strength in Helen's body, crashed down.

Its point of contact was the wolf's skull. It cut short the shrill yelp of exultation. It checked flight, it struck the beast down. She tried to hold to the brink as she swayed from her feet, and then went over, head and tail limp, rolling over and over, coming to rest at the bottom, head submerged in the current, a shapeless, lifeless body.

The cudgel dropped from the girl's hands and she lifted them to her face, covering her eyes.

Taylor was beside her. She heard his excited questions, felt his hand on her arm.

"Milt turned her loose," she said brokenly. "He turned her loose on your trail — He said you — He said that you would come back — and he didn't want you to come back — ever —"

He was so still that she lowered her hands and looked up.

"He said that I would come back?" he asked steadily. She nodded, mute before his manner. He took one of her hands in his roughly and something like great rage swept into his eyes. "And you came after me, to save me from Pauguk?"

"Y-yes," very lightly.

"Why did you do that?" hoarse voice rising in pitch.

"She'd have killed you!"

"Yes — And then — ?"

"Killed you, John — And then you never *could* have come back!"

She felt the grip of his hand relax; a great breath slipped from him.

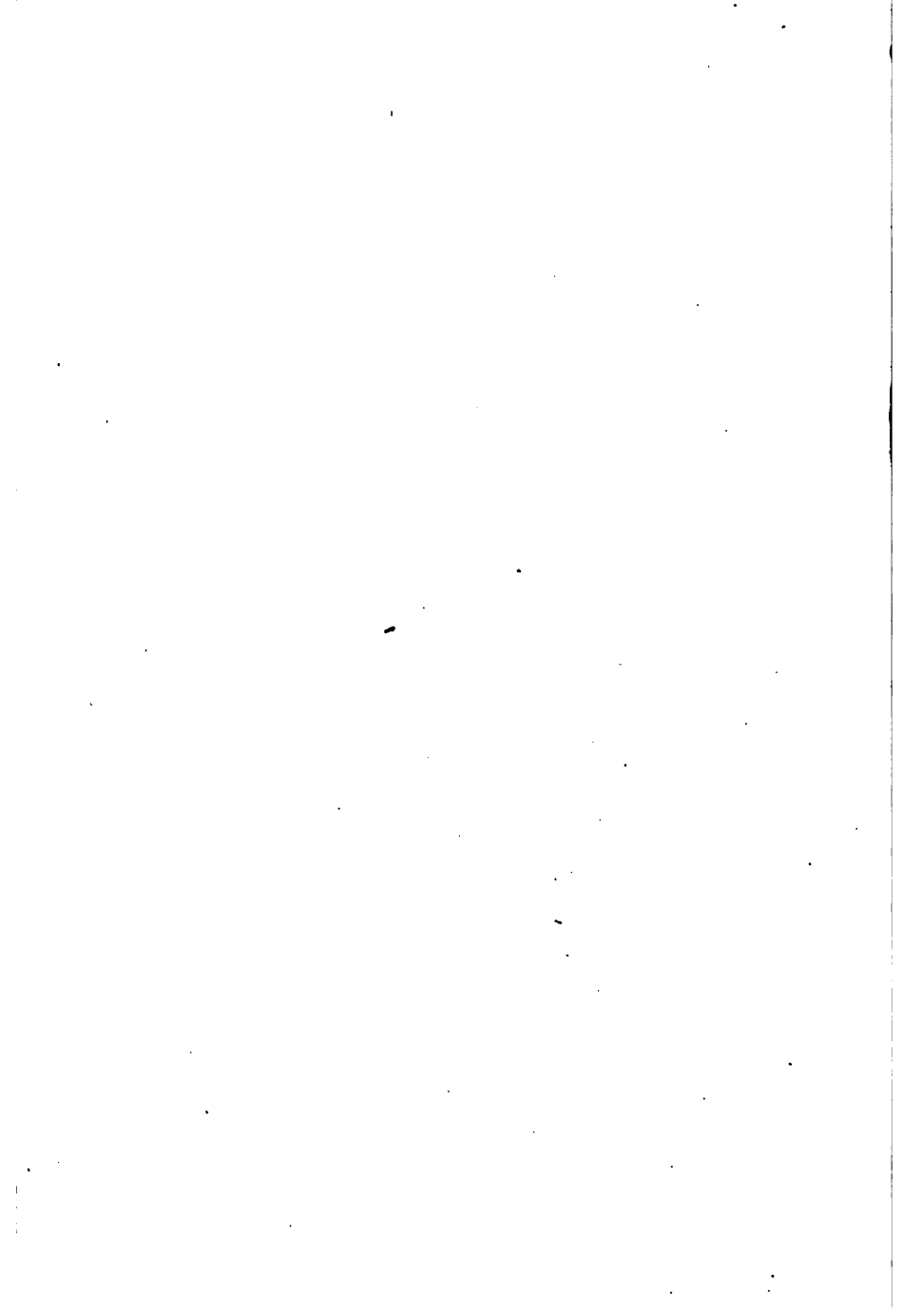
"You wanted me back?" he whispered. "Wanted me back — after all?"

"Oh, I wanted you back *because* of all, John! Because I — because I — Can't you see that I —"

His arms, binding about her body, drove the word from her lips — against his lips — and she was crying for the first time in those weeks of distress, because there was no distress then, no misgiving, no unhappiness, and she could cry — for the happiness that swelled in her heart.

Behind them the Blueberry hurled itself at the high bank and above, between them and the clouds that sped across the brilliant sky, the canopy of pine trees that would never be of the past spread their peaceful shadow over the two, like a blessing.

THE END



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